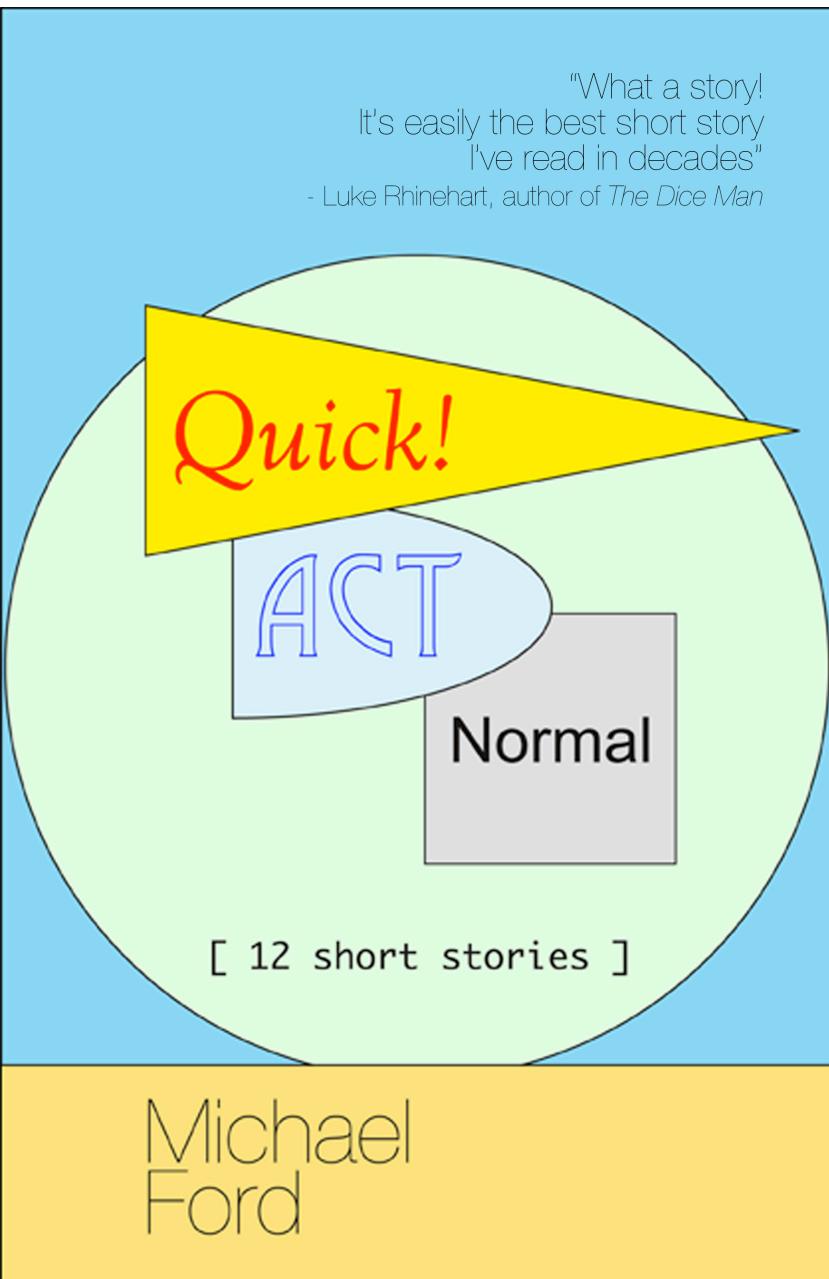


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Quick!

ACT

Normal

[12 short stories]

Michael
Ford

MICHAEL FORD
SHORT STORY SELECTION
FROM
QUICK! ACT NORMAL

Michael Ford is an Anglo-Azorean writer, born in Rhodesia in 1973. He travelled widely through his education, relationships and work, and his studies took in forestry, landscape management, journalism and radio, geography and history, philosophy of science and environmental ethics. Working for an international NGO he wrote books, articles and studies on sustainability policies and practices, speaking and supporting campaign activity on these issues around the world. Wishing to take his enquiry into human experience and behaviour deeper and wider, he now writes fiction, exploring themes relating to relationships, identity, spirituality, sexuality, morality and the nature of reality.

This selection of five stories is taken from the collection *Quick! Act Normal, 12 Short Stories*, first published in February 2013. They are some of the reader favourites from that book, and happen to be some of my personal favourites too. If you enjoy them, pass them on.

www.michael-ford.co.uk

Quick! Act Normal first published February 2013
This selection published June 2014

This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental

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China Dolls

My name is Francis Alan Jefferies. Frankie. Frankie the Harp. AJ. Franny J. Alan Franks. And the rest. By the time I was out me teens I thought I'd seen it all, inside and out. Rucking and thieving landed me up in approved school, then borstal, then prison. Slow learner, maybe. I didn't think about nothing except getting what I wanted, and God help you if you got in my way.

I was born in Hackney in the East End, but got dragged up in a tower block down the Elephant in the late 60s and 70s. Dad liked to drink and knock us about, till I got old enough to return the favour. Me mum and younger brother just tried to keep out the way. I was a bit of a face from when I was young, which had its advantages, but the downside was the local copper, who had it in for me, big time. Once they reckon they've got your number, that's that. Contrary to what most people think, it wasn't me mates who lead me astray. They was all I had. That, and anything I could get me hands on in under five minutes. At seventeen I was driving a brand new 3 litre Capri. The geezer who paid for it must have wept. I had nice threads, birds comin' out me ears, days in bed, nights on speed – when I wasn't banged up, that is.

Eventually I calmed down a bit, after some advice from an old lag I respected—Old Arfa—and I started thinking about going straight. Or at least getting caught less. He taught me to play the blues harp—the harmonica, that is. I got right into the old Chicago and Delta blues players: Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf and all that lot. Our own Cyril Davies too. I love it. There's nothing like being locked up for months at a time to learn what the blues are all about, 'specially when you get out to find you got no home, no job, no one.

Being in the nick, you need *something*, whatever gets you through. Inside, it's nothing but long days and longer nights.

That was donkeys ago. Since I hit fifty I've pinched less, and been more savvy when I do. I make a few quid on the horses, do the door at a couple of places, a bit of collecting, knock out a bit of gear. Nothing heavy. I live alone, never got involved. I've tried to keep things simple.

So, life was fairly calm, you might say. Predictable, within reason. But then, when I really *did* think I'd seen it all, I found out I truly hadn't. I found out that things ain't always what they seem, that the hardest heart can be softened, and that there's definitely nowt so queer as folk.

The whole thing kicked off less than six months ago, the middle of last summer. Where I live, it's on the third floor of a big place in Notting Hill, divided into flats. Respectable. One night I'm playing the harp and I get a knock on the door. It's not late, so I imagine no one's coming up to try giving me a bollocking about noise. I open the door, and there's this gorgeous little Chinese girl standing there. Obviously I'm caught out. In the second before I opened me north, I thought: wrong door? Wants to score? Kissogram? And, would you Adam and Eve it, fuckin' Jehovah's Witness. Shows what I know.

'Good evening. It is you who plays the harmonica?'

'Er, yeah love, that's me. Is it botherin' ya?'

'No. I would like to learn to play it.'

Pronounced every word clear as a bell. But I'm smelling a wind-up. Women like that don't just come knocking on your door, and *definitely* not for harmonica lessons. Doesn't happen. But I don't play too badly as it goes, so the old ego steps up. Anyhow, I'm standing there, looking boss-eyed at this bird, then I remember me manners and invite her in. We have a cup of tea, and she tells me her name's Gong Lin. Medical student from Shanghai. This girl can't have been more than 25, and she's an absolute picture: skin like porcelain, stunning brown eyes, cupid's bow lips, fine black hair tied back. I was tryin' not to laugh at times, it was mad. Like I said, beautiful women just showing up at your gaff is the sort of thing you dream up when you're in the nick, cock in hand, not the sort of thing that just happens one night out of the blue.

But, over the years you learn to roll with the punches, go with the flow and all that. She tells me she wants to learn the harmonica, paying customer, like. I say fine, but you don't have to pay me, I'm

happy to teach. She asks what harp to get, and where from, so I write some stuff down for her, and we arrange something for the next night. She's keen as mustard. Me too.

Took me hours to get off to kip. Kept picturing Gong's face. Nothing like the mares I usually end up with after the club's kicked out. Most of them stink of booze and fags, and what comes out of their mouths in bed'd make a sailor blush. Trying to picture this little China doll hanging round me ... it was hard, but ... lovely. I got nothing but hard edges, and I reckoned if anyone could help smooth a few off, it was her. Of course, I knew I was building it up, blowing it out of proportion, but it's the kind of chance that when you're inside, you tell yourself you're going to grab with both hands if it ever comes your way. Trouble is, I could see meself grabbing *too* hard.

In the morning, me head was clearer. I took it all less serious. In the shower I gave meself a once over, saw what the years had done. Too much was curved where it used to be flat, and vice versa. What would she want with a lump like me?

Anyway, I bollocked meself for thinking that way, and got on with things around the flat. Went down south at lunchtime, ended up in a café, talking with a few of the locals, then called in on me old dear. Didn't say nothing about Gong, though I wanted to. It's hard on your mum, being in and out of the nick. They still see you as their baby, even if you're tattooed up, broken nose, scars from half a dozen bottles on the back of your head. Of course she wants to see me settle down with a good woman. She's never quite given up hope.

The evening comes round, and I'm nervous as a virgin on her wedding night. Bit me nails to fuck, then cleaned the top of the oven, filed some papers, dusted a few bits in the front room. I seen I had fifteen minutes before she was due, then I really went to town—cleaned the bathroom in ten minutes flat, all around the bog. Women notice that sort of thing. I quickly hoovered, and chucked all the crap by the side of the couch in the box room. Opened all the windows, even though it meant you got the noise of the traffic.

I was sweating me cods off by the time the door went. Threw some water on me boat in the bathroom and had a quick word with meself in the mirror; then I opened the door, and there she was. I actually felt light-headed when I saw her. Beautiful. Perfect. Smiling, asking how I was, showing me the harp, still in its box.

I got it together, and stuck the kettle on. She'd bought me some Chinese green tea, so we had that. Bit weird having tea with no milk,

but it was lovely as it goes. Anyhow, we kick off, and I'm trying to teach her how to hold the harp properly, meaning I have to place her hands right. Touching her hands was like touching ... I dunno. Never known anything like it. Her skin was so soft, her hands so delicate, these fine little bones that felt like they'd snap if you squeezed even a little bit hard. I was having so much trouble concentrating on what I was trying to tell her, 'cos me mind was having a conversation with itself the whole time.

I was getting her to make the right mouth shape for getting a good note out of it, and watching her lips pucker up. She had this tiny pink tongue flashing about in there. It was mesmerising. I defy any straight bloke to give this woman an harp lesson and not think the exact same things.

She could get a note out of the thing, I'll give her that. I was showing her how to get a nice bluesy slur, putting on a few tracks to show her what I meant. Didn't occur to me that she needed a reason to be interested. I've seen blokes inside getting into some pretty unlikely stuff over the years, so it didn't seem that funny to me. When you've seen one of the most dangerous men in the country teaching another of 'em to knit, you've learnt something about human nature.

When I was explaining this or that to her about the harp, she'd just look me straight in the eye. Her eyes *shone*. Felt like I was pitching headfirst into 'em, like I was melting inside. I kept hearing meself saying 'I love you,' over and over again. Couldn't control it. It did me head in, in the nicest way possible.

Well, she's round for a couple of hours in the end. Really up for it. I told her I was playing with a few blokes the next night down the pub, and asked her along. She says she'd like to very much. I'm nearly swooning. *Me!* I let her out, and all I want to do is kiss her. Wasn't till afterwards, when the spell was broken, that I started giving meself an hard time about it. Told meself I was a dickhead, I was a fuckin' creep, that I should of respected her more, and meself. All that.

In bed that night, though, it was all different again. I wasn't being a creep, I was smitten. It happens every day, on every street, in every city in the world.

Next day, the Wednesday, I get a call from a bloke I do a bit of work for sometimes. Waldoks, a rich Jew in the north. I have to run around a bit, place a couple of bets here and there. Then I drop by to talk with him about some other things. He wants me to pay someone a

visit, collect a debt from a Mr Price. He'll make it well worth me while. No worries, he says, easy job, no kicking the door in or crackin' heads. Fine. He gives me a letter and off I go. It's a nice gaff in Pimlico. I announce meself through the intercom, then an Asian codger collects me at the door and we head up the stairs. Well, the room I get taken into doesn't look like the sort of place you live if you owe people money. But if I've learned one thing over and over again in life, it's to never assume. The butler sits me down in this book-lined sitting room, I s'pose so the man of the house can make an entrance. Big himself up a bit. Finally, in he comes. Fat bastard. Portly, I s'pose *he'd* say. Sixties, English, done up to the nines.

'Good afternoon. I understand you are a representative of Mr Waldoks?'

'That I am. He said you'd be expecting me?'

'Indeed. We have an arrangement, and now he would like to collect?'

'Indeed he would. He's given me a five-figure sum.' I got up and handed him the letter from Waldoks. Price grunts, excuses himself, then comes back after a couple of minutes with an envelope. I flick through it; I can see the money's there, as much from his body language as my maths. You can't do what I do without knowing how to read people a bit.

'Good enough.'

'You don't wish to count it?' I smiled.

'You've got an honest face.'

Waldoks got sorted, and he sorted me. Better than working for a living. That night, business was forgotten. I knocked for Gong at her place, and we headed down the road. She was chatty, excited about seeing me play, she says. I'm trying not to get a big head; I tell meself I'm just a jailhouse harp player gigging in me local. Nothing to get too excited about. I love playing, that's all. I give it some welly, I put me heart and soul into it. That's all you *can* do in life.

It's only a quarter of an hour's walk, and it's a gorgeous summer evening in Notting Hill. The streets are busy, but laid back. I'm feeling good about life. We get inside and it's already buzzin' in there. I keep Gong close, and heads are turnin'—a few smirks. The DJ's playing blues tunes from all over the last seventy-odd years. I love it all. We get a beer each, and I take Gong up to meet the band. They're a grizzled lot, as blues bands tend to be. Been drinking, smoking and getting up to no good their whole lives. You can picture what's going

on in their heads when they catch sight of Gong. One or two of ‘em, their eyes are popping out. It don’t bother me, blokes are blokes.

We kick off with *Mustang Sally*. Wilson Pickett made it famous, but it was originally recorded by Mack Rice, in ‘65. Every blues band in the world knows it. Then we go into *Rollin’ and Tumblin’*, a real favourite of mine, especially Muddy Waters’ version. Even Dylan did a great cover of it. Clapton, Canned Heat and Jeff Beck too. Some songs will always be covered—they’re just too good, and it feels so good to play ‘em. Anyhow, I’m well fired up. Picture it: dark room, blue and red lights, hot air, crackling snare, thumping kick, rumbling bass, sweet piano, fierce guitar, the whole lot going, and me on the harp, ripping right through the middle of it. Billy, the guitarist and singer, was giving it loads, and whipping the punters right up. We done *Sweet Home Chicago*, *Boom Boom*, *Smokestack Lightning*, and Billy’s favourite, *Bad to the Bone*. The crowd were regulars, and a few of them were discerning blues hounds. They knew we knew our stuff.

We done a few more standards, then took a break after an hour. I went up to where Gong was sitting, and she was still by herself. I’d tried not to eye her up, but had seen a couple of geezers try it on without success. I asked her about it, and she said she just politely spoke Chinese until they gave up. She’s no mug, this one. I was so pumped that I weren’t feeling as soppy this time, but I knew this had to get messy at some point. I tried to distract meself by jokingly asking if she wanted to get up and blow a bit, but she politely declined, with the cutest smile you’ve ever seen. Madly, I could see her up there, ripping it out, throwing shapes, the whole lot.

Second half was great, we really went for it. Did lovely versions of Jimi’s *Red House* and B.B. King’s *The Thrill is Gone*. For some reason me head got filled with memories from being inside. Kept seeing faces of old lags, young offenders, couple of screws who weren’t too bad, some of me old cellies. Was a bit weird, how strong it come over me. Still, made Gong’s face all the sweeter when we finished. I wanted to help pack up the gear but the lads told me to fuck off, not keep the lady waiting. I wasn’t gonna argue, was I?

I took her for a late-night curry in Brick Lane. I asked her about China, and all the human rights shenanigans, the amount of prisoners they top each year, and blow me down—she just couldn’t find it in herself to have a go at the lads at the top. Kept saying it’s complicated, hard for outsiders to understand and all that. Still, she said she’d rather be here for the time being. No surprise. I wondered whether she’d

have to marry a Chinese bloke, ‘cos of her parents, their customs and that. Couldn’t bring meself to ask. Didn’t want to hear about some other bloke she’d eventually go off with.

Waiting for a cab back, I stood there, all warm and fuzzy after a couple of Kingfishers and a brandy, thinking about how proud I’d be if she was on *my* arm. It’s in me nature to be a gentleman, that’s just how I was brought up, even if I *was* a bit naughty. So, I kept me hands in me pockets, and just let meself feel protective over her. I thought it’s the nearest *I’ll* come.

I walked her to her door and she thanked me for a lovely night. She said she’d see me for another lesson the next night if I’m about, then leaned up awkwardly to give me a peck on the cheek—and I nearly fainted! Lost for words I was. Made some silly noise and waved her off, feeling like I was twelve years old again. I stumbled up the stairs to me front door, this mad sort of half-smile on me boat. I couldn’t believe it. Everything I’ve done, every horrible thing that would make most people sick, and this little angel turns me into a mumbling idiot with just a peck on the cheek. Life’s full of surprises.

The next surprise came when she didn’t show the next night, the Thursday. Of course, I gave meself grief about it, thinking I shouldn’t have asked her about China, all that nonsense. I was getting more and more wound up, and the old habits kicked in. I went out looking for trouble, and found it in a pub in Highbury. I just kept going till I found somewhere I wasn’t known. Not much to say about it, just a ruck with a few blokes about nothing. They weren’t little blokes, and looked a bit handy, but I was sober and more up for it than they was. Smacked the biggest bloke first, while he was still giving it loads of verbal. Bust his nose, and he’s pissing blood and staggering about and yellin’. The other two are just staring so I whacked one of ’em, then really went to town. Fighting on a regular basis, as you most likely will if you’re a criminal from day one, teaches you what matters: speed, getting in first, and being ready, willing and able to do some damage. Test their bottle. I fucked off before the old bill got there, and hoped there was no CCTV. Don’t need any more chats with that lot. Most scrappers don’t want to talk to the law, so I assumed I wouldn’t have to worry about getting a knock.

Next day, the Friday, you’d never have known, ’cept for a bit of colour on the cheek. I went down and knocked for Gong, but nothing. That night, no word either. Or the next day, the Saturday. I kept telling meself it weren’t my fault, I didn’t do nothing to piss her off. By

Saturday night I was going mental, and I did something naughty: I let meself into her place. Breaking and entering was an old specialty of mine, and it's particularly easy when it's your own building. In my defence, I was worried. She'd disappeared into thin air without a word, and I was just tryin' to be Mr Helpful.

I always loved that sense of time standing still when you first break into a place at night; waiting in that black silence, letting your eyes adjust, listening. Then, moving about, quiet as a mouse, looking. It's a buzz. It's not the same since night vision come along. I checked the bedroom first, and she still had a few bits on the bed—told me she'd been packing in an hurry. Drawers were still open. In fact there were a couple of pairs of her drawers on the bed. I stared at them for a few moments, then sighed and mooched off out again.

She had a very basic little life, this one, which made it easy to find things. She had one pile of post, and a notepad by the phone. I looked about for a pencil, then did a rubbing of the top page. It's an old trick, but works every time. I got an address in English, and the rest must've been Chinese.

I couldn't find nothing else that looked interesting, so I left. Upstairs, I looked up the address on the computer, and got no clue whose place it was, but I knew exactly *where* it was. I got a route map there, got me stuff together. I drove to the lock-up, grabbed me piece, night vision and one or two other bits of kit, and hit the road, west.

I'm on the outskirts of Bath, it's just after one in the morning. Everything's posh round there. Massive gaffs. I have a look on me phone at a map of the area. I know I've got the place, but I ain't going up the drive, so I go off down the lanes and park up. I get me tools, strap up and stick on the night vision. Nothing but fields of cows. Bit different to creepin' around Peckham. Even for these parts, the gaff's a big'un, you can see it from a mile off, between the trees. I trudge through the fields and get to an eight-foot wall running round the estate. I can hear music at this point. Good chance they got CCTV, but I reckon if I hoof it, I can be in before the shit hits. Have to chance it.

When I look up at this wall I'm wishing I was younger, fitter and a stone lighter. But I get up onto it in one piece, and have a look. There's a big do on. Music and lights, security out front, a load of pukka motors on the drive, and further up, it looks like the side doors are open. It's a big fucking place, and it's in full swing. I ask meself

whether Gong's really gonna be in there somewhere, but I'm positive she will be.

There's too much open lawn between me and the house, and too much light. No good. I drop down and nip along behind the wall till I'm round the back of the place. I get up on the wall again. The doors are open, lights are on, but no one's about. Between the back wall and the house there's an hedge maze. I can't see no one, but it's too risky to just waltz in. Have to get in upstairs. So I tell meself: in for a penny, in for a pound, and I drop down. I creep around the maze, and I spot a drainpipe going up to a balcony. It'll have to do. I finally get up the bottle and run across to it. Me heart's beating like a rabbit's. I get hold of the drainpipe and start climbing. Lucky there's so much going on, 'cos I'm out of practice and I'm making a bit of a row.

I get up to the balcony and climb over, puffing and blowing. I'm knackered already. The room's dark, and I try the door. Locked of course. I get a lock pick on the case. I picture, just then, Old Arfa. He'd got done for all sorts, but it started with a B&E. I shake me head, and remind meself I'm acting in defence of a friend. I know I wouldn't have a leg to stand on in court, 'specially against rich nobs like this lot, but you have to tell yourself you're doing the right thing.

Just before the lock gives, I can hear humping. Unmistakable innit? I pause, pull down the night vision and try to see through the net curtains. A bird riding some bloke, jumping about like a nutter. I look over at the next balcony, and it looks like a job to get to it. I screw me fists up and silently mouth the word *fuck*. They're both getting well animated, so I decide to crawl past and chance it. No choice. The music coming from downstairs should be loud enough, and if they clock me, will they really give a monkey's? They got better things to do.

The door gives, I ease it open. They ain't noticed. I get right down on me belly and start snaking along the carpet. I'm nearly through, and the fuckin' thing gets caught by the wind, and bangs off me boot. I curl up, hoping for the best. I hear a giggle from above me; seems the bird's more interested in banging cock than banging doors, God bless 'er.

Then there's the matter of the bedroom door. Closed. The door to me left is presumably the bathroom. The balcony door bangs again, and the angel says, 'Take me on the balcony!' The geezer's tryin' to protest, he sounds off his nut, but she just jumps up and dashes out there, starkers. What choice does he have?

When they're ensconced, I nip over to the bedroom door and quietly open it a crack. It's light in the hallway but I can see a switch. I take a moment, then have a look. No one about. I go for it, slip over to the light switch and flick it off, then close the bedroom door. God loves me, so far.

I'm sneaking down the hall, and the place is dripping money. The wallpaper probably cost more than my flat. The music's fucking loud—banging dance music. Don't ask me what kind. I'm trying to come up with a plan, but can't think of anything besides grabbing someone and asking if they've seen a Chinese girl appear in the last couple of days. Sounds mad even to me, but what else am I gonna do? I'm up to me nuts in it by now.

I follow the music to the balcony at the top of the stairs, and I get me first sight of it. At the bottom of the stairs there's a big foyer which is buzzing, packed. It connects to what I imagine is a ballroom, where most of the noise is coming from, and there's a load of other doors leading off of it. Everyone's dancing and falling about, in skimpy little costumes, mostly with their cocks, tits and arses hanging out. And in amongst it all—blow me down—there's Gong, done up in a tight-fitting Chinese dress. Me ticker nearly stops ticking. She's wandering about the place serving drinks, pills and powders to this lot off a tray. Looks like most of them have had their fill already. Except, I'm staring, and I get the feeling it's just a bird who *looks* like her. But I'm sure I'm getting to the bottom of all this. I keep looking, and I realise there's an handful of Chinese birds serving drinks in there.

I hear a door go and someone's on me. I spin round and it's a skinny, youngish geezer, wearing stilettos, a mask and fuck all else. 'Say nothing mate,' I tell him, 'I've gotta do me bit in a minute. Bit of cabaret.' I wink at him, and he's swaying around looking off his tits anyway. He looks like he wants to ask me something, but can't work out what, and turns around to wander back down the hall. I roll me eyes and go back to staring at this lot. Then I get an idea.

Five minutes later I'm wandering about, right in the middle of it all, stark bollock naked, except for the mask I pinched off the geezer. I've stashed me gear in another bedroom and hoped for the best. First thing goes through me head as I start walking through 'em, is that maybe they all shag each other every other weekend, and'll get suss 'cos they won't recognise me todger. Most of the accents are pure upper crust or foreign, so either I'd have to keep shtum, or fake it. Fat chance.

It's hard to make your way through without constantly bumping bums, or more than once, cocks. Bit weird. I've seen the Chinese girl from behind, and just keep going. Must have been six feet away, when some woman behind me says, 'That's quite the tattoo you have.' I pull up. First, I know that she's looking at this stupid tat on me arse, of a naked bird sat in a champagne glass, and second, I know that if I don't perform right here and now, it's all over. All I can think to do is turn around slowly, look her up and down, then nod towards the bedrooms and raise an eyebrow, like old Roger Moore used to in Bond films. Well, this bird's class, and just smirks, winks and fucks off in the opposite direction. Phew.

Then I see something mental, even for this place. Some tubby, drunken old twat grabs one of the Chinese girls, pushes her up against a wall and he's trying to get her tight little dress hiked up. Nearly impossible, but that don't stop him trying. She just stands there looking freaked, and a little crowd stands around watching! Me eyes are out on stalks, I can't believe it. I think of Gong, and I can feel the red mist coming down. I want to whack the fucker, but no one else seems to give a toss. It's doing me head in. If I let it go I'm as bad as him, somehow, and if I jump in I'll be rumbled. Well, it gets even more weird. Some other bloke comes storming over, yelling at the old cunt to leave her alone. I recognise the voice before I see him. It's only the geezer from Pimlico, Price.

I do a quick about face and head over to a drinks table near the stairs. Can I find a glass of water? Nothing but bubbly. I look over again, and Price has his arm round the geezer, and he's leading him across to some other sort, who's wearing nothing but a huge pink feather boa and laughing like a drain. Price is running his hands over her tits like she's a second-hand motor he's trying to get shot of. I've seen a lot of nasty business, but the upper crust seem to be particularly twisted when they put their minds to it. That's what too much money does I suppose. You end up thinking you really do own people.

At this point, the plan is to find Gong and whip her out of here quick. I know she's going to be here somewhere. For some reason Price's appearance leaves me in no doubt.

I decide to have a touch of Dutch courage, and grab a glass of bubbly off another Chinese girl. I throw it down me Gregory just as the room goes dark, and a red light hits a fuck-off great disco ball hanging down from the ceiling. Straight away everyone just hits the deck and starts grabbing handfuls, sticking this and that in wherever.

It's mad. You think you've been around, and then a few hundred toffs in masks and boots start rumping right in front of you. I defy anyone to take that one in their stride. I'm thinkin', no one ever talks about the *smell* of an orgy. But believe you me, it has a smell all of its own. I just step over them to the far side of the room and slip off down a corridor.

So, I'm legging it about, checking all the other unlocked rooms I can find. Me tackle's bouncing up and down as I go, and I can't help laughing at the nuttiness of it all. Part of me wishes I had it on tape.

As I get to the kitchens, I can hear a woman's voice, obviously the guv'nor, doling out instructions. She's English, and speaking very clearly, like she wants to be understood by idiots. Or foreigners. I look through one of the round windows in the double doors, and sure enough, there's a bunch of Chinese girls being addressed by this English bird in black leather gear. I shake me head and mutter, and then I clock Gong, stood at the back. No doubt about it.

I do believe my heart skipped a beat.

I'm wondering what to do next, when this woman's boat appears in the window, staring at me. She opens the door, and all I see is her leather getup.

'May I *help* you?'

'Nah, you're okay love, was just lookin' for a glass of water. I'm spittin' feathers.'

'I wonder *why*.' She has this mean look, and I'm wondering if I'm gonna have to twat her and leg it with Gong. 'The drinks are back *that* way. I hope you weren't fishing for one of my girls. Several of your number have *already* transgressed rule number one this evening.'

Still givin' me attitude, but she ain't going to stop me.

'Okay love, you do *your* job and I'll do *mine*. Gong? We're leaving. *Don't* make the mistake of getting in my way, miss hard bollocks.' Gong's looking at me with fear in those pretty little eyes. 'It's okay love, come on. We're leaving this madhouse.'

In the end I've had to yank her out of there by the hand, and the leather bird's just stood gawping. Gong's dumbstruck too, but I get her to lead us back upstairs so I can get dressed and grab me gear. She's looking like she's in shock. We get back to the door I'd come through in the first place; it's open, and no one's about, thank fuck.

We're on the balcony and she's just shaking her head, rambling to herself in Chinese. I reach down and take her heels off, fling them over the side, then I rip her dress up to the hip. I just grab her

shoulders and give her this look, and she gets her head together; gets down that drainpipe quick as you like.

I make it the ground, and we peg it round the maze, heading for the back wall. And all hell breaks loose. All the security lights go up, on the house, in the trees, on the wall; dogs start barking, people are shouting, and I do believe I hear the sound of shotguns being loaded. Heard that before, once or twice. We get to the back wall, and I near enough throw her over it. It did flash through me head that I could have asked if she was happy to leave or not, but it's too late.

We're well into the fields, me with the night vision on, leading her by the hand, when I hear the dogs behind us. I spin round, draw me Glock and aim. First one's a clean head shot, dead; second needed three. The thing's practically crawling up me leg, claret everywhere.

Gong's in tears by the time we get to the motor. I put me foot down at first, then ease back after a bit and head us onto the main road. I'm trying to find the words.

'So, you wanna tell me what that was all about?'

Gong looks at me, then away again.

'You have dog brains on your face.'

'So I have.' I wipe me boat with me sleeve and sigh. It's gonna be a long drive back to town.

After a bit she calms down and starts talking about the whole thing. Seems Price had me followed. Making sure I dropped the wedge off to Waldoks I s'pose. At some point they must have clocked Gong, and his taste for little Chinese beauties would have had him dribbling when the lads reported back. They got hold of her number, called her up, saying they was friends of her old man, and invited her to a party at the manor, promising some good introductions. But, when she arrived they turned the screw, threatened her with deportation if she didn't perform the Chinese waitress bit.

Poor mare looks shell-shocked when we get back. When I go to drop her off at her door, she just pushes me towards the stairs up to my place. Inside, she gives me this look. She wanders into the bathroom, starts running the shower and peeling her kit off, with the door open. I do likewise. Well you would, wouldn't you? If I thought she looked good with clothes *on* ... anyway, we get in and she starts off soaping me back. A minute later I'm standing there hard as a rock, but I'm too spent to worry about it. She says nothing, just keeps going, head to toe, and finally starts soaping me tackle. Could have married her on

the spot. After a bit she says quietly that to her, British men all smell like cheese. There's no answer to that, is there? I'm trying to think of things to say, as you do, but it don't seem necessary. I soap her after that. It's heaven. Just running me big rough hands over her perfect skin was erotic beyond belief, but at the same time I'm still feeling really protective towards her. It's a weird mixture.

She got into me bed straight after, and I had an education. I learnt something about making love that night. I'd always thought it was like fucking, but slower. Bollocks. Making love is evidently something you just can't do with people you don't feel a certain way about. I can't even describe what that means, but I can say that at times she made me feel like *I* was the woman, somehow. Vulnerable. Open. I know how that sounds. But I felt like I was falling in love, and just wanted to keep falling, to never hit the ground.

And I haven't. Not yet. After what happened, there was no way I could stick around town. If Price was wanting me either permanently shtum, having seen all that nonsense, or if he was wanting revenge for fucking up his do and half-inching one of his prize China dolls, then I was in trouble. Blokes like that have enough clout to have anyone sorted. So, Waldoks did me a favour, and me and Gong hoofed it overseas to where some of his lads could set us up for a bit. Can't say where. Best we just get on with it here for a while. The old man said he'd do what he can to make things right so's we can go back, but nothing yet. Not that I mind. I do local jobs for him which pay the bills, and Gong's studying medicine here for the time being—and getting there with the harp.

Every day I come home to this amazing little woman who makes me light up on the inside. She's hard and soft, she's sincere, honest, and diplomatic when need be. She makes me think before I act, and she's making a better man of me every day. I dunno what comes next, but I feel okay about it. A good woman'll make an optimist of you. I recommend it.

Most of All, I Miss the Sky

The thing I miss the most, being out here, is the sky. Look at it: an endless black vacuum. The void. It's our very best description of nothing. It gets painful to look at on a bad day—the human soul is not made for it. You feel too exposed, and too alone. The sun is hot when it comes, but it's not the same without a blue sky, clouds. Just another dead rock in the infinite immensity. And without ceremony, without poetry, it is soon to be gutted. After being marooned out here for nearly a year, the guys with the machines will come. They will make this place deader, even less whole. But they will breathe life back into *us*.

I don't do the prospecting or the mining. I'm a botanist. I set up the biodomes for the company, ploughing my tiny furrows a few feet from silent airless death, the most lonely farmer who ever lived. Jesus Christ. I'm feeling sorry for myself again. I should be happier. I should be skipping around the damn room; it's going to be over soon.

Anyway, I look after food production, and work with another guy on atmospherics, to make the place liveable for when the Big Team brings the gear down. The company mines these rocks, and the workers need a living space. We set up a few domes, creating enough organic life, and enough room, so the people can survive, and not go nuts. Usually they come about 12 weeks after we get everything up and running, but the company went bust, after one of the directors embezzled a fortune to fund bad investments and bad women. It's taken this long for another corporation to buy the company, and to decide to get to work on this place, LA-10A. If they hadn't, we'd die out here, eventually. Probably we'd take a walk outside without our suits before we ran out of food and O₂. I don't think it takes long at all.

Ten weeks is not so bad, certainly at the rates of pay you get. But a *year* ... that's a long fucking time on a dead rock with no sky.

Picture our canteen. A perfectly white room, with white furniture. A table and six chairs, and a single, small round window. You take a seat, have some coffee. You gaze out of this window as you drink. All you can see outside is black sky and white planet, and the sun or the stars, depending on the time of day. No clouds, no fog, no rain or snow, no rainbows, no sunset lightshow, no trees or grasses waving in the wind, no birds, no insects.

Now picture the interior of a little diner. It's raining hard outside, a cool, grey Autumn day. The streets are awash, cars splashing pedestrians with dirty water. Most hurry past, heads down, umbrellas, maybe just a newspaper to keep the rain off. When the door opens, the couple of dozen people inside get a sharp blast of damp air. Inside it's warm and humid, the windows are steamed up. The diners are a mix of tradesmen and office workers mostly. There's a gentle hum of chatter, cigarette smoke curls up to the ceiling. The diner orchestra plays: the arrhythmic drone of conversation, the ker-ching of the cash register, the hiss of the coffee machine, the rustle of newspapers, the occasional clink of a spoon stirring a cup, the thud of a palm against a ketchup bottle, the rattle and clang of knives and forks.

The little scene might seem greyed out, sickly, maudlin ... but compared to *this* reality, it's like spring break in Florida, all colour and action, booze and tits. *Life*. Here, it's *lifeless*. Even the air in these domes sits on us like a weight, as does the silence, and the slow tick of time.

Our base is small, just the two domes, about the size of a football field all together, and a handful of small cabins linked up by thin corridors. We could have invented cabin fever here, all by ourselves. We had four goats and a dozen chickens at the beginning, but we ate the last of the motherfuckers nearly three months ago, and it hasn't been the same since.

Now, we pass each other like ghosts, Norm and I. In the corridors, we barely acknowledge one another. He sees me as his one and only staff member. He needs to feel superior to me. I don't even report to the guy. He asks me if I've done certain things around the place, asks if I could *just* do this, *just* do that. I call them Norm's 'just' jobs. I think psychologically he needs to keep a sense of structure, of hierarchy. Not me. I rebel. Whenever he asks me to do anything I tell him to fuck off. Our relations have broken down.

A couple of months back I took to walking the dog. I get in my suit and go out there. I throw a bit of old tubing as far as I can and pretend my old boyhood dog, Cappie, is fetching it, bounding through the tall prairie grasses that surrounded our house for a mile in every direction. In those memories, it's always summer. He'd get the stick every time, no matter how long he had to hunt around for it, his tail wagging like crazy. I loved that animal, more than any person, ever.

There's a range of hills not far from the base. I go up there on the rock rover, *Doofus*. You can really get up some speed in that thing, and the low gravity means you get some great air off the berms. I picture Norm, staring at me in disgust from one of the little round windows and I shout, 'Suck my dick, Norm!' and laugh my ass off.

Up on the top of the ridge, you can see for 20 miles or more. A huge expanse of nothing. Man was not meant to live in places like this. It's why the company sees them and has to start planting life. Nah, I'm kidding. They just want money. Mostly they mine moons and planets, and sell whatever they find wholesale. They create new life on some, on a contract basis. The ultimate real estate developers. My old division did paraterraforming; we'd rig up huge domes and create life under them. The domes get linked up, and gradually extend over the planet's surface. It's faster than terraforming, which takes generations, and once they're self-sufficient they can be used as stepping stones for further exploration of the region. The domes themselves are largely constructed on the planet from local materials. We have a 3D printing process which is actually really neat.

As part of my training I stayed in a place like this for a couple of months. Hated it. Never dreamed I'd get stuck on one. I couldn't look up, that first week. It made my mind squirm, to look into total nothingness, just stars and more stars, never, ever ending. When you look straight up you sometimes feel like you're actually stuck to the bottom of the planet, looking down, and if the gravity was switched off, you'd just fall forever. Now I look, and I feel calm. Even when the lights in the sky come. I've counted at least five different types of craft since we've been here. They appeared way off at first, then they kinda zipped past, then started to wander by slowly. Now, they even hover nearby. When I'm up on the ridge sometimes these smaller ones come and do these crazy little lightshows for me. Kinda remind me of cheerleaders for some reason. I don't know what in fuck they think they're saying, beyond 'Check us out, we can do *this* shit.' Don't even know if there's anyone *in* those things. Never seen anyone. Norm

won't even discuss it. He just shrugs and wanders off in silence. I rather musically shout, 'Fuck you, Norm,' and he doesn't even turn around. I guess he's heard it a time or two by now.

And after all this time out here, climbing the fucking walls and praying for rescue, out of the blue Norm just leaves me a message on the fridge door. You believe that? No big announcement, no games, just a note telling me that we have confirmation that the first ships arrive in three days. That means that in around 65 hours from now, I get to see *other people*. I can't talk to Norm about jack shit, so I'm making these logs, for the sake of saying *something* about it.

I spent this morning going round the gardens, primping. We have no weed seeds, no contaminants at all, just perfect fruits, vegetables and herbs. But I needed something physical to do. The biodomes are the only decent place to be on the inside. When I first got here I made a hammock out of a tarp and strung it between two poles—sort of a tradition of mine. I rock myself there, listening to a recording of the ocean. Norm just snorted the first time I asked if he wanted to try it. Fuckin' Norm.

I guess as they expected us to be here a few months at most, they didn't think to match us up in terms of personality. I let myself into his room from time to time, when he's in the bathroom. He always takes the *exact* same amount of time to shit, shower and shave, so I go in for a snoop, just to *check*. You want to know *something* about who you're living with, am I right? I found his diary: paper, bound in leather, written with a pen. Old school. In it, he is disparaging about me. Just refers to me by the initial C. That's the initial of my last name, Chalmers. He can't even treat me like me a whole person. He's perfect for this place, this necrophiliac business. I *think*. Hard to figure him. I've decided he needs a good woman, someone to listen to all his little insecurities in the midnight silences. Someone to tell him he's interesting, that he's valid. Attractive even. We all need that.

Tomorrow, they come. Today, I went over all my data from the last month, did my charts, wrote the same report I've written every week for the last year. I needed something to focus on. I'm *so* excited. Even Norm's spoken to me. Didn't look at me, but said, 'Good morning,' as he sailed imperiously past. Jackass.

Now, I just sit and type. No lights in the room, just the glare of the monitor. I can picture it: my eyeballs in close-up, reflecting the tiny movements as text jerks its way across the screen ... you can hear the

thudding of my fingers on the virtual keys, the faint hum of the electronics and the AC, and nothing else. My mind keeps flicking back to the ships, three of them, on their way here. Like a kid before Christmas, I can't get it out of my conscious thought for very long. I get that tumble of excitement in my gut. I sip at my private reserve, and wince as it burns down my gullet. I hope the inbound crew thought to bring some good whisky. It was a tradition in the old company. These new guys, who knows?

I wonder if there will be any women on the ships. I actually can't remember the sensation of touching one. I know what to do, in my mind, but I know that the next time, it's going to be a shock to the system. I was in love once, a long time ago. Making love with her was unlike anything else I've ever known. *That's* the feeling I want again. But honestly, just sex would be fine right now. Yeah, put me down for some of that. Remind me I'm alive, and a man. Remind my dick that it's not just a hose. Back home every song, film, advert—*everything's* about sex. Here, it's like it doesn't exist. Only the plants and insects get lucky. Lying in the hammock in the biodome, amid the silent orgy of pollination and procreation, that's the nearest I've been to sex in a long while.

They didn't say I would be going back on one of the ships. I couldn't bring myself to ask Norm, who's done all the talking. But they *must* have brought someone to relieve me. They can't expect me to stay. Maybe a few weeks, to train someone. I can't think about it. I'd crack if they said another six months. I just can't think about it. I should sleep.

It's the middle of the night and something wakes me. There is someone in my room. I click on the light, prop myself up in my bunk and squint into the dark corners. Movement. I take a breath, and ask who's there. Something moves again, and stands up, still obscure. It takes a step towards my bunk ... I can see a little more ... it looks *alien*. I can make out a dark, lean, ribbed and ridged torso; sinewy, muscular limbs, glistening skin. Its head is large, oval, bulbous at the back; it has smooth features, black eyes with tiny white pin points at the centre. A tiny mouth, almost a beak. It's expressionless, I think. It looks powerful and fragile at the same time. I ask what took it so long. No response. It won't come closer. I can kind of see it, but not properly. It watches me. It reaches back into the shadows and pulls out ... my head swims ... I feel sick ...

I wake. I look around the room. No blood. Nothing. I lay back, laughing. I shout ‘*Shit!*’ and laugh some more. Relief. And then I remember: today’s the day. I get up, go shower to celebrate. We don’t do it very often – have to recycle and ration water. I soap myself, still shaking my head and laughing. I dreamed an alien brought me Norm’s severed head. That’s funny. I wonder what it meant. Obviously, it’s because today’s the big day. The ships arrive. It’s about us being separated, and me being happy about it. I guess.

My mind wanders ... I think of women again, imagine the ships bringing a smorgasbord of gorgeous scientist chicks. Lab coat cleavage, short skirts and stockings and high heels ... brunettes, blondes, red-heads ... all shapes, colours and sizes: Scandinavian amazons, petite Asians, curvy Africans, pale Celts, wiry French, lean, big-breasted Slavs, painfully beautiful South Americans ... I grab a fistful of cock and indulge every detail until I burst. I get a flash of Norm’s severed head again just as I shoot, and I’m standing there, wobbly-legged, dripping come and laughing at the insanely unerotic mental image of his severed head in the hand of some insectile alien creature. I wonder what my mental state would be after five years of this existence. Surely no one lasts that long.

Out in the corridors, there’s no sign of Norm. I go to the canteen for breakfast, nothing. No sign. I sit down to eat my bowl of fruit and stare out of the window a moment ... then I bolt for the changing room, cursing. I’m spitting with rage. In the hangar there’s no *Doofus*. I have to fucking walk. I leave the airlock, bounce across the surface a few feet, and slow to take it in. The flat plain around the base is now a bright, bustling spaceport. Three huge ships dazzle the area with their floods, their storage bays open like gaping mouths, loading ramps like tongues, vomiting people and equipment with gusto. There are all kinds of buggies, trucks, flashing lights; everyone moves with purpose, with precision. And all silent, in the void. Your mind fills in the sound. I wander through it all, looking around at all these fucking people. They go about their work without expression, ignoring me, and I suddenly don’t feel like trying to make conversation. This moment is the biggest anti-climax of my life. I spot Norm’s suit entering the airlock of a cabin, along with a few other folks. I bound over there angrily, tripping over some canister en route like an asshole.

The door closes just as I arrive. I knock, wave, hit the buzzer. The suits turn around in the airlock and I can see them roll their eyes. The door slides open after a few, and I join them. Norm stares straight

through me. Right then I feel more anger towards him than at any time in the last year. But this is not the moment to lose my shit. The airlock opens into a small room, and we all step in. There are five of us altogether. We remove helmets and there she is. Blonde, smiley and cute. But, it's all business. A tall, greying dude with a square jaw and gravelly voice introduces himself.

'I'm Dr Leonard Stein, head of operations. And you must be Chalmers.'

'Y-yeah. I, er ...'

'Doesn't matter why you weren't here to meet us.' His eyes are steel. Norm coughs, as if to underline the shared embarrassment. I wanna drop the motherfucker. 'Your part in this project is nearly over. You'll be going home tomorrow once we have *The Nautilus* unloaded.' He gestures to the other two people, one male, one female, well groomed and kinda straight. 'You'll brief your replacements in one hour.'

'S-Sure. Howdy. Not much to know. I'm ready when they are.' I smile at the woman, she smiles back. My little heart flutters, a red bird in a white cage.

I manage to avoid looking at Norm, and go back to my room, carrying the image of the cute botanist carefully in both hands. I hit my bunk and inspect her in detail. Pixieish. Short blonde hair, bright blue eyes, poiky nose and ears, two perfect rows of straight white teeth, full pink lips. My cock insists on being worked again. I picture her in her suit, stripping, holding my gaze the whole time. Slower, I tell her. She's throwing gloves and boots off, almost angrily. A glove smacks me in the face. I laugh, and try to focus again. She hauls the top off to reveal nothing underneath, not even a bra. She has pert, ski-jump breasts, nipples erect and pointing confidently at me. She pushes down the thick white trousers, still staring at me. I lick my lips. I see her flat, milky belly revealed, her hips, then the very top of her ... and God damn, that's all she wrote.

I lie there for long moments, my mind a perfect Zen blank. I close my eyes and see the blackness of space, but suddenly it seems to have less presence. Less power over me. The psychological relief of getting back under a real sky will be huge, I know. I will get up in the morning, and I will love the weather no matter what. I will see dirt and grime, and drop to my knees, work the grit into the tiny furrows of my fingerprints. Nothing sterile, nothing contained. I will gulp the shitty air down into my lungs. I will cough and I will feel alive, even as

pollutants stream into my body. I will eat every kind of food there is. I will eat meat that caused suffering beyond anything we would allow on humans. I will sit in church and sing along with the congregation, feeling their desperation to fit a comforting framework around their minds, to quell the incessant itching of the Questions: Who *are* we? Where did we come from? How did we get here? What is our purpose? What happens when we die? I will leave the church and go fuck a prostitute, maybe two. I will open my heart and soul to every woman I meet. I will get a dog, and live the simplest, richest life I can. Then maybe I will start a cult, have thousands follow me, painting images of me fifty feet high—and the look in my eye will say it all. Everyone will know that I *know*. I have *been there*.

The hour passes in this philosophical manner, and I feel happy. I calmly head out to meet my replacements at the main biodome. They are actually called Jack and Jill. Total coincidence, they say, with the world's smallest laugh. But you have to wonder if someone with a modest sense of humour engineered it. I smile gently when they tell me, and lead them off. We walk around, me pointing things out and giving a running commentary, a guided tour, Jack taking notes and Jill recording it all on video. They ask questions and I answer as straight as I can. I just want to burst in with my own questions, ask them everything about what is happening at home, and importantly, how's the fucking weather? No, I *mean*, how is it on your *skin*? How does it *feel*? *Well!*? But I keep going. Doing my job, for the last time. If I do it well, and quickly, maybe I can get the hell out of here sooner.

I show them the computer set-up, the records, comms, crew quarters, medical, galley, canteen ... and most of the time I'm hard as a rock, my dick pinned upright by my belt. It feels really quite jolly to have an erection in the company of a woman. Jill seems real nice ... I can imagine that she wouldn't mind a bit if I told her. She'd probably say, '*Awww, you just go right ahead sweetie!*'

I ask if they want to stop for a drink and a chat in the canteen but they say they have a tight schedule. I say fine, and stay to have a herbal tea. My own brew. I watch them stride off, clipboards clasped to their chests like eager schoolkids. I haven't seen anyone else in all this time, and now that they are here they are still like ghosts. There must be a hundred people arrived. All quartered in the ships I guess. Norm has instantly adopted the role of superior, assisting the head honcho, following him around like a puppy. Fuckin' Norm. He's an asshole, but he's *their* kind of asshole. I don't even make *that* grade.

The rest of the day I spend going over data, checking stocks of seeds and equipment against records. Stuff that needs doing if you're going by the book, but I just do it for the sake of something to do. And maybe I want Jill to have an easier time of getting to grips with it all, and not find herself saying, 'Fuckin' Chalmers,' several times a day. I feel like I owe her that.

Later on, Norm and I are invited to dine with the crew. It's a big dinner, held in the belly of *The Pequod*. Stein addresses the gathering, talking about the mission as if it's the first time this has been done, like he's fuckin' Columbus. Another asshole. I count 19 women among the crew, and all are eminently fuckable, on a space freighter or anywhere else. Because the dinner's a big deal we get wine. I drink as much as I can, and after dessert I make the rounds, introducing myself to the women, with the excuse of wishing them well with the next stage. I don't give a shit what I look like. I only really connect with one of them, Shanice. She's petite, black, also drunk and tonnes of fun. I suggest a ride out in *Doofus* to show her around, and to my surprise she thinks it's a great idea. We grab a bottle of wine and sneak off, as the tables begin to break up and people start mingling. There's an air of slightly forced gaiety, and I get the impression that Stein is not universally loved and admired.

In five minutes Shanice and I are in the changing room, and we're half in our suits, half naked, tripping over our clothes, laughing our asses off and grabbing each other all over the place. We end up kissing and my heart's hammering. She's grabbing my ass and looking right into my eyes. She asks me when I was last with a woman. I say, 'What, a *real* one?' For some reason she finds this incredibly funny, and is laughing so hard she says she has to go pee. I say okay, and thinking about her question, I realise I actually can't remember the year for sure.

She comes back, tells me to hurry up before the booze wears off. We suit up, head out the airlock with the wine and take a little buggy of theirs back to the base to grab *Doofus*. Then we're heading out, top speed, giggling like crazy as I take us over the jumps. It's my last time, and I'm so happy. She keeps leaning back, staring drunkenly at the blaze of stars overhead, shouting about how cool this is, how she never gets to have fun any more. I don't say anything, but in my mind I'm picturing me and her in a park back home, wandering along with a dog, playing fetch and stopping every once in a while to neck. Just

looking at each other, able to lean our foreheads together without the dull thump of our helmets getting there first. Still, these are the best moments of the last year, and I try to stay in them.

‘Hey Shanice, you wanna see the sights?’

‘You bet.’

Her eyes sparkle. Crackling, hissing static, punctuated by human voices, interacting, excited by one another, on a lonely rock in the middle of space. It’s totally unreal to me.

We drive for maybe 30 minutes, shouting back and forth, her asking questions about here, me asking questions about there. I tell her about the last year, and apparently she hasn’t been briefed. When I finish she tells me she can’t believe I just kept going, not even knowing if we’d get rescued or not. I shrug, tell her you do what you gotta do.

Finally, we crest a hill and there it is. The main comms tower. It’s five stories high, a bare-bones structure, little more than a gantry with a sealed control room at the top. On its roof is the huge dish antennae for deep space transmissions. She looks at me with wide feline eyes, this incredible grin. It’s almost overwhelming. I tell her to bring the wine. We reach the base of the tower and head for the lift platform. I pull her on board, and hit the button. The gears turn and we’re pulled up, every few feet giving another mile of nothing much to look at.

‘It’s actually kinda beautiful,’ whispers Shanice. I look at her with eyebrows raised, saying nothing. ‘You don’t think so?’

‘I ... it’s just been a lifeless *rock* for me ... all the beauty I’ve seen here in one *year* is in my biodomes ... and your helmet.’

‘Ha! You’re kidding, right?’

‘Nope.’ Deadpan.

She smiles and looks around again at the view; we’re almost at the top now, about 60 feet up. When we stop, I lead her off the lift and we take a slow wander around the walkway that surrounds the control room. I sweep my arm across the horizon.

‘Look around you kid, look around you. One day, all this will be yours.’

‘How long before you got over it?’

‘About a week. It fuckin’ gets to you.’

‘I guess.’

‘How much longer are you here for?’

‘Another few hours. Back tomorrow.’

‘Huh. Me too.’ I’m nervous. I’m buzzing. I laugh, then say, ‘We should hang out.’

‘You’re leaving tomorrow? You must be *ready* to leave, huh?’

‘Come on.’ I take her huge gloved hand in mine and lead her to the cabin door. I punch in the code and the door opens. We step into the airlock and just look into each other’s eyes. Her mouth curls slowly into a smile. Mine too. I’m still getting used to smiling a real smile.

Inside, I turn on the oxygen pump and heating. The room is about twenty feet by ten, dominated by huge windows and a bank of equipment for manual transmissions and data collection. There are a few chairs, and at the back there’s a bunch of cupboards. I get out two blankets and spread them out on the floor. After a few minutes, when the temperature and O₂ levels are good, we take each other’s helmets off, and climb out of our suits. We sit opposite one another naked, just looking, nakedly. God *damn* she’s beautiful. I crack open the wine and we pass it back and forth. The room’s totally silent, but I hear music in my mind. I start humming. It’s an ancient piece of orchestral music, called Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Shanice knows it, and joins in. We lay on our backs, humming, drinking and staring out at the stars.

After a while she props herself up on one elbow and leans over to kiss me. I put the wine down and we get to it. I was right, I knew it would be like something ... *new*. Shanice seems to get exactly where I’m at, and takes it slow. We’re alone, together, in our own private universe. At one point she’s riding me, and I’m looking up at her, and I look out, at the millions of suns strewn across the blackness, made tiny by context; humbled and beautiful from here, but close to: scorching death. It’s an amazing way to say goodbye to this place, to end this year without a sky. I’ve suffered here, it’s been stressful, mentally and emotionally bruising. And this is like some kind of payoff. Shanice is a kind person.

By the time we’ve both finished we know it’s late.

‘Won’t you catch hell for this?’ I ask.

‘This ain’t the military, and they can’t do shit without me.’

‘How come?’

‘Cos I’m the damn pilot.’

‘No shit.’

‘No shit.’

‘Alright then.’

We're not even dressed, still lying together in silence, when it starts. Something's wrong. The comms light up and start bleeping. I hit the master mic, which routes straight through to the base, and ask what's up. There's a snap and crackle, static and a voice cutting in and out. I think I hear the word attack, but can't be sure. Shanice and I stare at each other, stunned. Attacked? It's unknown in the company's history. The alien from the dream flashes through my mind.

'What should we do?' I ask her, more for the sake of saying something than for practical reasons. If the base is being attacked, we can assume it's game over immediately. 'Are any of you guys armed?'

'We have a small security detail, a few weapons. But if they got caught with their pants down ...' She holds up her hands.

'Do we head in and probably get wasted *too*? I don't know what we could do to help.' I just keep shaking my head.

'Me neither.' She starts chewing the inside of her mouth, scratching at her knuckles. How long will the air last in here?'

'There's a machine that makes oxygen, but it works slow. We don't come up here really. We'll have maybe a day, between the two of us.'

'Fuck.'

'Yeah.'

I know we both want to head right back and find out what's happening, but if the enemy is armed, we're a gonner as soon as they spot us.

'Let's see. I can send a distress call to HQ. Tell them there's an attack, and to send in the fuckin' marines.' I try to look reassuring.

'Will they do that?'

'You tell me. You know this company, I don't.'

'Well, we have military contracts. We can only tell them what's happening, then it's up to them. They'll either send the cavalry or they won't.' She shrugs nervously.

I send the message, which'll bounce across a series of relay stations, and be picked up in a few hours. We pace around. In terms of a plan all I can think of is fucking again, but neither of us can get up for it. We give it a half hour, then we hug, suit up again, and set off. We decide to just take what comes, as any back-up from home won't get here for days, if at all. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. We drive on.

As we near the base there's no smoke or airborne debris, no sign of a heavy weapons attack. Shanice is leaning forward in her seat,

gripping the top edge of the dash. She's saying nothing, but her thoughts are deafening.

We get within a hundred yards of the nearest dome. Nothing. No sign of any people. The ships beyond are towering above the base, and we drive around. By the time we round the final dome between us and the ships I can hear my heartbeat in my neck. Shanice grabs my arm and there's just an intake of breath. I look over to see what she's looking at.

A pile of bodies. No marks, no sign of violence, but there are at least six suits, heaped up next to a loader. We get closer and there are more by the loading ramp of one of the ships, sprawled like rag dolls. We look at each other, both waiting for the other to make the decision. Without a word, I climb out of my seat and approach the nearest pile.

'Keep watch,' I whisper. She just nods, eyes wide. I get right up to the pile laying between the loader and the main building. The bodies are all face down. I look up and around, trying to see what happened, who did this. Surely they're still nearby, meaning I have minutes to live, tops. I reach out to the body on top of the pile and haul it over. It looks-'AAARRGGHH!'

I jump back as the whole lot of them leap up and flail at me; I shit myself and try to run but I can't. I trip and fall flat on the ground.

Long moments pass. I look up and can't see anything. I sit up and turn around and all the bodies are now standing up, they then collapse in hysterics, most of them. Some just point and laugh like drains, hissing in my ear over the comm. I'm speechless. Then it catches up with me, and I'm caught between rage and relief, and total fucking embarrassment. I get up, shaking my head, and stagger back to Shanice, who's looking just *crazy*. I smile and go to put my hand on her shoulder but she bolts out of her seat and bounds towards the nearest crowd, they turn and try to scatter but some are still on the ground. She jumps high into the air before landing on one of them. They get a flurry of slo-mo punches and a stream of stunningly filthy language, before she stands up and walks away. They stagger around, no longer laughing, looking worried. She winks at me as she walks past.

An hour later we're in my bunk. Her skin smells heavenly, and I breathe her in, over and over. Just lying in her arms is the most peaceful thing I can imagine. My last night here, it's like part of me is dying, and a new part of me is about to be born. I whisper this birth and death thing to Shanice and she places a finger on my lips. She

leans over and kisses me, a fragrant gale into my mouth. I can't even describe how she makes me feel, so there's not much point trying. It's enough to say I feel safe with her. Like I matter. I wouldn't even know what else to want.

Early morning, an hour before dawn. I pack my few things, and head for the galley for a bite. As I'm collecting a picture from the fridge door, Norm comes in. He puts the kettle on, without even getting a mug out, or trying to make a drink. He stands there awkwardly, then blurts out, 'So. You're shipping out.'

'Yep.' We hold each other's gaze for the first time in months. '*Wait ... you're not?*'

'No, not yet. I'm going to stay for a while. Help them get settled in. Make sure things get established properly.'

'*Fuck. Wow.* I ... I don't think I could take another *day* of this place.'

He sighs.

'Ah ... *look*, Bill. I ... I *regret* that ... well, *you* know. That things got so shitty. Cabin fever I guess. We all have our little coping strategies ... and ... well, mine was to behave like an ass. And I'm sorry that that's the way it went. I ... I know you're a good guy. A hell of a botanist. You kept us alive. Don't think I don't know that. Or appreciate it.'

'Look man ... it takes two. I was ... having a hard time of it. Cracking up pretty good. I mean, this was a straight fuck-up, right? Wasn't meant to happen. But ... well, I'm sorry too.'

'It was what it was. We're still alive.'

We both shrug, and we laugh. Norm walks over and shakes my hand. I clap him on the shoulder. He hugs me. I hug him back. We look each other in the eye one more time, nod, then I walk out of the room.

It's ringing in my ears as I head for the ship. Of all the things I could not have expected in the last 24 hours, that would have been way up there. It gets to me way more than the frat boys the night before. I'm kinda touched.

The ship is meant to leave in 45 minutes. I head up, and into the winding corridors. I ask my way up to the flight deck, and Shanice is going through pre-flight with the co-pilot, another woman. She smiles as I enter, and nods to a chair at the edge of the cabin. It's exactly as I imagined it: banks of lights, dials and screens, with a huge segmented

window in front. I've never flown up front before, and it's neat. She's checking readings, evidently following a sequence, talking back and forth with the co-pilot and someone on the base that sounds like Korzibsky. It's technical talk, another language entirely. I ease back in the big leather chair and close my eyes.

I'm woken by a rumbling. The flight deck is way up, and I look out the windows to see a huge dust cloud being kicked up by the engines, obliterating the base. I don't even get one last look. But it doesn't matter, I'm going to see the sky again. They radio the base, and then we're lifting off.

In my head there is classical music playing, the string section is describing the strange mix of relief and melancholy I feel as the planet starts to shrink away, faster and faster. Again the feeling of part of me dying ... I look across at Shanice and she's steady at the helm. The waiting is over, and the tension oozes out of my bones. I melt in the chair, my shoulders slump, I let the tears well up then flow. I can picture the teardrops, shimmering with the dull vibration of the engines, each reflecting the planet, and the sun, just cresting the horizon, flashing into fire across the gulf of space.

Too Posh for Porn?

I was once asked if I had any sense of a missed calling in life. I believe so, I replied. A pornographer. That was a conversation killer. Well, my parents were disappointed enough in me already, and I probably shouldn't have been so honest. But it made me think: *why not?* All you really need is a bit of business savvy and a passion for what you do, and I had both. So I counted my pennies, made a few calls, and it began.

After about a year I had converted a warehouse into a fully-functioning pornographic studio. I had a good business partner and film director in Rodd Steed (an ex-porn actor himself, as you may have guessed) a small crew, a steady stream of actors, a good solicitor and accountant, and the time to develop 'scripts.' A couple of years down the line, I was carving out quite a lucrative niche in arty intergenerational lesbian flicks. The website was doing very nicely. We also had websites for the stock hetero, bi and gay stories involving men and women of the trades, emergency services and military, and babysitters, teachers, bored housewives, the occasional dominatrix and anything else we could come up with.

But *this* story ... well, it was something different. How it started was, I'd come up with a story wherein an aristocratic type, the domineering Lady Felchington, instructs her two maids in the art of making whoopee. That delightful old folk tale. Problem was, no Lady F. I tried out a few of the regulars, but no one could get near the accent, or the *bearing*. I'd told the story here and there to various associates, put the word about, but no joy. I wasn't that obsessed with it, so I let it go. However, a few months pass, and I get a call from a friend, a jeweller in London, who *knows people*. He reminds me of the Lady F thing, and tells me that he's heard on the grapevine of an

actual Lady, down on her luck. But where it gets interesting is that apparently, she'd been selling intimate favours to high rollers for a year or more. The family had nearly gone bankrupt in the recession, and the estate was on the chopping block. Seems it was left in her lap to sort it out. I could picture myself, saying what a pity it would be to lose the estate and have to move to the suburbs. *Ouch.* But I could imagine that if she was already fucking for money, then how much of a leap could this really be? I got Paul to have a discrete word, and almost entirely to my surprise, he said she'd call me. About a week later, the phone goes.

‘Hello?’

‘Mr Diamond?’ No mistaking that accent.

‘Call me Eric. I take it you are Lady Rathbone?’

‘Call me Penny.’ I *loved* her accent. Her tone was difficult to pin down though.

‘Penny. Thanks for calling. Look, I’ll get right to it. How do you feel about doing an adult film?’

‘Needs must. How much do you pay?’ She was straight to the point too.

‘Depends what goes on. Basic would be a couple of grand or so, then there’s extras.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, such as … ahem … such as femdom, strap-on … ahem … *that* sort of thing. But it’s all negotiable.’ Her accent was doing my head in a bit. It just doesn’t feel right talking to a posh middle-aged women about this kind of thing. If you doubt me, *you* try it.

‘I see. Well, I’ll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it.’ I thought for a moment.

‘Penny. Are you *sure* you’re up to this?’

‘Quite. As I said. Needs must.’

‘Right you are, Penny. You know where to find me?’

‘Your friend gave me your coordinates.’

‘Er, right. How are you fixed for the fifth?’

‘The fifth is fine. I’ll see you then.’

And that was how it started. In this business, you are constantly living in a world between worlds. Everybody’s thinking sex at some point in their day, untold people watch porn, or sleep with prostitutes … but it’s so very hush-hush in our nation. That means it’s peopled by those who are able to *embrace* that world. So, you get used to fringe characters, you get used to strange. But this was a new one on me.

Penny Rathbone's big day rolls around but I can only get her fixed up with Astra Starr, a gorgeous young woman who is to sex what a ninja is to assassination. It means a change of storyline is all. So we're sitting about on set; it's a nice living room, and the action is to take place on a huge red Chesterfield sofa covered in sheepskins. Everything's lit, the crew are hanging about, we're having a cup of tea. Penny arrives in a gale of fragrant charm, like some West End luvvie. I have trouble keeping a straight face when she sails over to say hello.

'Well then, Penny! Good to see you darlin'. You alright?' I give her a peck on the cheek; she smells like gold bars.

'I'm very well *indeed*, thank you. And this is ...?' she indicates Astra.

'Ah yes, your co-star, Astra. Astra, this is Penny.'

'Hiya Penny, you alright?' Penny gives a polite wave and smile, then looks around, eyebrows raised. It dawns on me that she's looking for a bloke.

'Ah. Indeed. Er ... Mr Diamond? A moment?' She drags me off out the room, smiling at one and all as we leave. Outside, she fixes me with a look.

'Am I to understand that you would like me to ... *act*, with *this* young lady?'

'That's right.' I smile as encouragingly as I can, trying to make it all seem perfectly normal.

'Hm. This wasn't part of the arrangement, now was it?'

'Well ... I don't see that we'd discussed any *specifics* on the phone.'

'But I am not a *lesbian*, Mr Diamond.'

'Call me Eric. And nor's she. She's bi as it goes, but this is *work*. I imagine you never heard the phrase 'gay for pay' before. Loads of blokes do it. So they say. Think of it that way if you must.'

'Good Lord.'

'You'll be in good hands, I assure you.'

'I see.'

'Look, would it be worth it for 5k?'

'Well ... I imagine it most likely would be.'

'And this is just the start. This goes well, you'll make a killing. This is easy money. You do a little for the punters, they do a lot more for you. As long as you look after yourself, you'll never look back.'

But it's your decision, no one else's. It all comes down to what's most important to *you*.'

'An associate of mine gave me much the same speech.' I never saw a human being actually thinking *elegantly* until this moment. Then she just gives me this little look, a subtle shift around her features that says she's on board.

'Penny? I think you might even enjoy it, if you let yourself.'

'Do you.'

I smiled.

'Suck it and see, eh?'

Half an hour later we're into it. The script, which I'd had to write in the two minutes after Julie Sukk phoned to say she couldn't make it for the Lady Felchington shoot, becomes an issue from the word go. Penny's 'outside,' about to enter the lounge. Astra, playing Jenny, is moping about on the sofa, waiting for Penny to come in, as Miss Cuthbert, her piano tutor. Jenny has to tell her she's gambled away her tuition money, then Penny's supposed to offer her money for some sexy favours. But.

'Mr Diamond?'

'Call me Eric.'

'Eric ... I'm not sure about these lines.'

'Lines?'

'Yes. It says here, 'Ooh yes, *eff* my pussy with your tongue.'"

'And?'

'Well ... *Eric* ... I'm just not comfortable with bad language.'

I was caught *right* out.

'Err, this is *pornography*, Penny. This girl is going to *fuck* you with a strap-on dildo, *after* about twenty minutes of oral sex, fingering, and possibly arse-licking if you're up to it. At what point *do* you think that bad language might get to be appropriate, in *this* particular context?'

'There's no need for sarcasm Mr Diamond.'

'Well *look*, just do your best, okay? Do what comes naturally.'

'None of this is coming especially naturally, I assure you,' she says icily. I look at her beautiful eyes, those fine bones, that poise, effortless elegance, and I want to comfort her, tell her she looks radiant, but to be honest I'm as lost as she is. It'll be whatever it'll be.

We finally got them rolling, and to be honest, I begin to see the funny side of it. Penny walks in from left of frame. Acting is atrocious.

'Hello ... *Jenny dear!* I hear you've got yourself into ... rather a spot of bother.' She's standing there, one hand on her hip, this mad

look on her face. Astra's a shit actress too, but for porn, she's right where she needs to be.

'Oh yes, it's *terrible* Miss Cuthbert.'

'Oh, call me ... er ... um ... Imelda.'

Astra's face is a picture. She knows Penny's forgotten her lines already and is just waffling. Somehow though, they seemed desperately locked in some weird alternate reality where their lives depended on them getting this done in one take.

'Well, *Imelda*? I lost my tuition ... *gambling*?"

'I see. Horses was it? Lost a packet on the derby this year myself.' Astra's eyes are like saucers—I'm wondering if she's about to get the giggles. Penny's so nervy she's just letting any old bollocks come out.

'Er. Well, *anyway* ... I lost the *money*.' She gives Penny a significant look.

'Yes. That really is too bad. Shocking. Awful. Tut tut.' She's gone totally blank, shifting from one foot to the other, looking miles away.

'*Sssooo* ... is there *anything you* can think of ... that we could *do* about that?"

'Hm. Er. Such as?"

'Well ... we could ... *you know*.' Astra's wagging her eyebrows like a lunatic, making faces at her fullsome cleavage and short skirt.

'*Oh! Ah yes!* Of course. Why did *I* not think of that? How silly of me! We could just have sex and you could have some money orf of me in return. Problem solved! *Well then!*' She suddenly claps her hands and rubs them, making Astra and the entire crew jump. 'We should get started then, should we not?"

'Shh-sure. Er, do you want to come over here?' she pats the sofa with a look of faint horror.

'Well, *of course!* I'll just sit over there, by *you*!' She strides over, elbows pumping like she's power walking. It was easily the weirdest porn I'd ever shot. Already.

'Do you want me to take my clothes off?' Astra's desperately trying to be sexy, but the strain is making her perspire.

'Oh Good Lord yes! Get 'em orf girl! Wa-hey!"

'O-okay.'

Astra strips off her top and bra grimly, climbing onto Penny's lap, who's still grinning inanely and looking jolly enthusiastic and completely uncomfortable about everything. Astra leans down and kisses Penny, who starts making loud *mmm* noises, the fake way a

parent does when eating a forkful of vegetables off their kid's plate. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. But it's riveting.

Astra finally sits back, and looks Penny in the eye. Penny looks back. Astra's expression hardens into one of icy determination. It's *on*. Penny's eyes widen as Astra swoops on her and forces her tongue into her mouth. As she tries to *mmm* Astra kisses her harder, stroking and squeezing her right breast. She suddenly leans back and rips Penny's cardigan off, then reaches round amid the gollies and goshes and unzips her dress. She yanks it down with a look of triumph and leans back a little. Sitting facing her co-star, she gives a Penny a look that says: you're *gettin' it*.

After a few minutes of insistent kissing, stroking, and nuzzling of neck, Penny's in a sort of trance. She goes limp while Astra explores her breasts, which are amazing for her age, then makes her way south. She pushes Penny down onto the sofa and licks her from head to toe. It's not often I get hard filming these days, but this has a remarkable weight of reality about it. Penny's now panting, soaking wet and utterly at the mercy of Astra, who's smiling to herself I notice.

It goes great until it's Penny's turn, then the nonsense starts again. She's kissing Astra's body like she's kissing a family member. Silly little pecks here and there. At least she's stopped the *mmm-ing*. After a few seconds Astra knows what's up and starts to wriggle. She's gyrating and undulating enough to make Penny seasick. She then grabs Penny's head and pushes it against her right nipple, growling '*Suck it, for fuck's sake! Suck my nipple!*'

Penny sits up, looks at her blankly for a moment, then her eyes screw up and she just *flips*.

Total. Wild. Animal.

Poor little Astra—like a kitten on a rollercoaster she is. I'm trying not to laugh. This fifty-something member of the landed gentry, trying to save the family castle by getting a bit of cock in front of the cameras—now letting all her frustrations boil over on a 19-year old woman and her every erogenous zone. She bites, sucks, scratches, swearing like a salty sea dog—it's an incredible show. Might be the first time in my life I felt like I was actually exploiting someone.

Astra, with fear in her eyes, motions towards the strap-on on the sideboard. Penny lunges at it, then swears and curses as she tries to get the thing on, then, with a flourish, she rears back on her knees, hissing, '*Well then, how do you want it, girly?*' She's like the wicked witch of the west. Except with a 9" black plastic cock strapped to her pubis.

The next 15 minutes is eye-watering stuff. On the plus side, we get two fantastic orgasms out of Astra. Penny gets a standing ovation. She leans down, kisses Astra on the cheek, then walks over to her dressing gown saying, ‘Now, where’s my bloody cup of tea?’

After patching them both up, we film a very moving cunnilingus scene, and Astra coaxes a hefty, grunting orgasm out of Penny. By the time it’s over we all feel like we’ve sat through the porn equivalent of a Liszt piano concerto. I’ve no idea what the punters will make of it.

Two days after putting Old & Young IGL Fun 17 (Astra Starr vs. Anna Bella) on the site, we had a flood of emails like I’ve never seen. The amount of downloads crashed the servers—and then it went viral. Everyone wanted to know who this new actress was. They wanted to know how it happened. It even crept into the national papers. Was it a spoof, a hoax? We had to post a new intro, explaining that this was indeed a new kid on the block. The pleas for more rolled in. A star was born.

The first call to Penny afterwards was strange. As expected. She still seemed to be in shock. She refused to see herself in action, and actually talked litigation until I told her we’d pay her £7k for one with a guy. It took only a day for her to say yes. She was in her comfort zone there, and most enthusiastic about Jonny Buck’s equipment. We did two more movies before she quit. She was being offered crazy money to go and shake it in the U.S., and off she went.

I didn’t hear from her again until a couple of years later. Called me up and asked would I like to visit her at her home, the estate that had set these particular wheels in motion. Naturally I was fascinated.

And so it was that we found ourselves on a huge patio overlooking the landscaped gardens, sipping Pimms No.1 on a warm summer evening in Bucks. She had a faraway look in her eyes, and spoke slowly. I got the sense she wanted me to soak it all up, to really appreciate why she’d done it all.

‘This house ... was built by my great great *great* grandfather. A looong time ago.’ She stopped, and I nodded ... waiting for her to continue.

‘Oh yes?’

‘Hm?’

‘Oh, I was just saying. You said it was built by your great great grandfather.’

‘Yes.’

‘Mm.’

'Do you know ... *how* many women have run this house?' I opened my mouth to speak, but she said, 'One. Me.'

'Right. Hm. That's, er ...'

'I *saved* this house. To do so I had sex with ... I'm not *sure* how many people. In the United States I became a partner in an adult film company, as you probably know, and am now in talks about buying into a documentary film company. I never have to lift a finger again. Ever. This house ... *stays* the Rathbone house.'

'That's good, Penny. I'm glad you worked it out.'

She turned to me, looking sincere.

'Thank you, Mr Diamond. *Eric*. It would not have happened without you. And do give this to Astra. She was also ... instrumental.' Penny reached down and took from her bag a small gift-wrapped box.

'I'll see she gets it.'

'And for you.' She passed me another, just like it. 'Just a little something.'

'Penny. I don't know what to say.'

'You needn't say anything.'

'Well, thank you. You're very kind.'

'Did I do the right thing ... do *you* think?' she asked, absently.

'Well, *look* Penny. I've been in the game for a while now, and I've seen untold people do it for the same reasons, over and over again. If you're cut out for it, why not? People can clean up, get themselves set up ... to do whatever they want. Never have another money worry, or boss. If they don't get a habit, that is.'

'Hm?'

'Coke?'

'Ah yes. Met a few friends of that powder in America.'

'You *would* do, yeah.'

'Indeed. Well. Would you care to stay for some supper Eric? We have a first rate chef these days.'

'You know, I think I'll hit the road, if it's all the same. Get back to my castle. Long drive.'

'Surely. Well. Don't be a stranger.' She smiled, and it was a joy to see that smile.

'You too, Penny.' I reached down to give her a peck on the cheek, and took the gifts with me. The last image I have of her was that sort of faraway look she had, a sort of quiet satisfaction. I can't quite put my finger on it. Heading down that drive, I felt a swell of something unusual. I think that in that moment I actually felt good about what I

did with my life, and it was strange to feel that way. We all bump up against one another, in a million little ways, and we all change the course of each other's lives as we do. I didn't get into porn on some mission to make people's lives better, but I helped Penny help herself, and that felt good, made me feel humble, not the way I usually feel about my profession. I mean, there's nothing wrong with helping people get off, but it's not exactly noble is it? I'm good at it, is all. When you find something you're good at, it's hard not to see if you can make a living at it.

However, you never know, maybe this is the year I look at doing something else, maybe something genuinely noble. What, in this world, might suit an ex-pornographer?

Agent, I Stab at Thee

If you've ever worked with the general public and had to deal with some sort of aggressive drunk, or raving bag lady, or young hooligan, you will know that feeling of dread, as they make their entrance. The discomfort that crawls through you, spreading the ugliness to your brain until you want to shriek. You just want them to leave, to go far away. But you may also want them to get help, enter therapy, take the medication, or do whatever it takes to make them better. Not just because it means that they won't bother you again, but perhaps because it may feel like the whole world just became a little more sane.

Because we could all go mad, if driven there. I myself hover seemingly at the brink of lunacy at this very moment. It takes surprisingly little to push one there. It's actually quite appealing in its way. It seems to promise an end to all cares, the way I hear heroin described by wistful junkies. On paper, that is.

And how did I get here, you may ask. But I've already hinted at it, have I not? Dread is central to events. But the idea of dread that formerly constituted my sense of the word lays dead at my feet. Dread is now something *truly* visceral. Like the difference between looking at a photo of a landscape, and being part of it, breathing it, standing surrounded by its immensity.

Why? Why should this happen to *me*? Yes, why indeed. This is a question I am asking relentlessly. Not just because we are born to question, to engage in some level of philosophical enquiry as we move through life's chapters, but because it can mean our very survival. But whether I survive or not, I may just get an answer to the why of this, and in the end, that may be enough.

Although the *very* beginning could be anywhere, from the philosopher's point of view, it is most relevant to say that about three months ago I received a short story. This happened because I am a literary agent. If you look at me now you will not see the highly successful, confident and generally happy man that I was, just that brief moment ago. My life was all pinstripes and chrome, champagne and cigars, private clubs and hard-bodied young women; for I sat atop my profession, and had no reason to suspect life would ever be otherwise. Where I sit now, perched eagle-eyed on a dusty plateau above a windy, winding dirt road on a little pebble in the Adriatic, I am *very* far from that world. I am brutalised, caked in sweat-streaked grit, exhausted from weeks of adrenalin-soaked madness. And I am sad, because I miss the hard-bodied women in particular.

But I was speaking of a story. One which—most pertinently—I did not read. I know that I did not read it because a follow-up letter was sent to me, referring to the previous, with a new story enclosed. The letter said something to the effect of, Dear Mr Lewis, I note the esteemed cohort you represent and I wish to be numbered amongst them. My place is assured, but I must trust that your keen eye recognises my gift with the written word, blah blah blah. I tried not to read the story, having given up on the letter almost immediately, but then I noticed the title, and was, quite understandably, compelled to investigate.

The story was entitled *Agent, I Stab at Thee*. Though one reads many things, including offerings from the occasional deranged mind, this had a personal ring that wrong-footed me, and I would have to investigate, in order to steady myself. I took it home and climbed into a hot, foamy bath with the pages. He had not had the decency to double-space, but so be it. My eyes bored into the paper.

The style was surprisingly engaging. It had a raw, grubby quality to it. The writer, who signed his name only as Briggs, was either a talented mimic, or a genuinely raw, grubby man. He described a writer, bashing away at his black, sit-up-and-beg cast iron Remington, squirrelled away in a decrepit bedsit in South London. He evoked a forlorn atmosphere, a life barely worth living, a life of subsisting on stolen milk bottles, a world of broken windows stuffed with newspaper, of fighting in the shadows to protect the nothing he had from junk-sick thieves—a man driven to stare at the world through mad, reddened eyes and write down what he sees. My mind reeled, because I drew the conclusion that this simply could not be invented.

One gets to recognise when people have lived their words, and when they have not.

Then, the writer in the story seeks out a measure of recognition. Like Bukowski, the so-called laureate of the low-life, he sought some measure of exposure, a degree of participation in the fine traditions of the Arts. So, he approaches a top agent with a sample of his work. He receives nothing. No word. Not a single solitary sentence suggesting that any commercial relationship may now, or ever, exist between writer and agent.

The writer broods, and he scowls, and he slowly screws himself up into a tiny, infinitely dense ball of hate and frustration. And then he uncurls, and patiently writes a new story, and sends it to the agent. It is called *Agent, I Stab at Thee*. It concerns a low-rent writer who wishes to be recognised, and so approaches a top agent for representation. In the story, the agent ignores him, and so he harasses the agent. More letters, strange phone calls to his house in the middle of the night, messages appearing in the pockets of his mistresses ... on and on. Finally the agent decides to contact the writer and put him off. He sends a letter saying he has talent, but is not producing what the agent feels suits the market at this point. This, it would seem, was an error.

The campaign begins in earnest, with rats being released in the agent's apartment, his car being sabotaged, one of his mistresses being harassed by threatening phone calls. The agent finally tells one of his Mason friends, who soon meets a sticky end. He does not wish to invite the writer into his life with a contract, so he tries again to suggest by letter that he join another agency, and suggests he obtain a copy of the current *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. Finally, the writer sends another letter saying he doesn't quite know how to end the story, asking whether the agent should live, by doing the right thing and representing the writer, or should he refuse to give in, due to false pride, and die in circumstances both mysterious and seedy?

So, the main story, not the story within the story, abruptly trails off. *What? I leapt naked and dripping from the bath to find the covering letter on my dining table, and I read it. Of course.* It said, 'I have yet to decide on an ending, but my hope is that you recognise a talent commensurate with a formal contract of representation. I feel you are of a calibre second to none, and thus the ideal man to work with, to our mutual benefit, in the hard world of the professional wordsmith. I await your thoughts.'

I stood in the dining room, staring into space, a puddle forming at my feet. Time passed quietly until my phone rang in my jacket, and I became instantly aware of the cold, of my nakedness. I ignored the phone and went to dry off.

At first, I felt trapped. But I was not *quite* the spider in the web—I had *some* hope. After all, I was *not* in his story, and could avail myself of the many benefits of the real world, which included the police. I had no intention of being sucked into this man’s reality. I would keep my head, my boundaries and my protocols. After a few minutes I started to relax. I took my phone into the lounge and curled up in a thick dressing gown with a large brandy. I returned the call, to an occasional lady friend. I thought of Briggs’ story, and the mistresses. My skin crawled. I started to wonder if perhaps a meeting with a private detective might be the best move.

When one reads a great deal, there are certain characters with which one feels familiar. They are stereotypes, caricatures even, but nonetheless, we feel a certain sense of reasonable expectation when meeting them in the flesh. However, on meeting a private detective named Norris, I was *mightily* disabused of that notion—an experience no doubt common to anyone actually encountering these standard literary characters.

I was confronted with a fat, hard man who in no way impressed in terms of charisma, physical appearance or wardrobe. He was no Philip Marlowe. He was more like the kind of stolid, typecast character actor who always plays the not-too-bright cop, the one with no people smarts, the one who we never learn anything about as a person. Perhaps it was his occupation, but this chap, Norris, didn’t seem inclined to give away too much about himself in any case. At his down-at-heel office in Victoria, he received myself and my story with straight-faced disinterest.

‘And so you feel you are in danger?’ His accent was pure London cabbie. The white English type, at least.

‘I may *well* be. I don’t feel inclined to take any chances.’

‘I see. Here’s what I can do for you. This guy Briggs was actually stupid enough to give an address. Even if it’s false, it may give up something, *some* connection. Or he may in fact *be* there, in which case I’ll have a word and suggest this kind of behaviour could be read as intimidating, and that he should cease and desist forthwith.’

‘Yes? And then what?’ I was eager to feel reassured. But I did not.

'Well, Mr Lewis, *usually* by this point the gentleman concerned has taken my *meaning* ... if you take my meaning.'

'I see. Well. We'll just have to hope so, won't we? And how much do I owe you for this service?'

'I'll bill you after, but it won't be much more than a couple of hundred if I find him quick. Depends on how long it takes to track him down.'

'Fine. Here's my card, you'll call me with any information, yes?'

'Indeed I will. I'll get right to it. Don't worry.'

'No, I won't worry.' I nodded good day and left, worried. If he wasn't the real deal, his office certainly was. I made a mental note to have my suit dry cleaned that evening.

I drove back through steady July rain, the drops one by one washing the colour from an already grey city. I toyed momentarily with moving to Tokyo, Rio or Barcelona, somewhere with distance, colour ... and hard-bodied women. The very idea brought me levity. At the next lights I whipped out my phone and scrolled through names until I found one to get excited about. I used the hands-free to dial her.

'Ello?' Her unmusical Essex accent cheered me instantly.

'Hi, *Mel*. It's Duncan. How's tricks?'

'You, *Duncan*, can fuck *all* the way off.' Ah, I remembered.

'I see. Mel, dearest, in my defence I was in a rather *awkward* position when last we met.'

'Don't give me *that* old bollocks. You can't bullshit a bullshitter. 'Aven't you worked that out yet?'

'Darling Mel, let us skip past all this unpleasantness, and make a date. I wish to wine and dine you as soon as humanly possible. If not sooner.'

'You mean you wish to explore my skimpiest of nighties with 'ands and tongue, and make your way slowly and deliberately inside me?'

'Ah ... well ... you certainly present a rather-'

'Stop gabbling, you twot. Make a reservation so stunning it brings tears to my eyes, then we'll see what happens. You get nice, maybe I'll get nasty.' Clunk.

You see? You see what I mean about something to get excited about? She could turn any man to jelly. Quivering, stupefied jelly. My God. She has done things to me that I would be prepared to go to hell

for. Or if not go to hell, then at least receive a serious telling-off from a member of the clergy.

That evening, we nestled in a soft, lipstick-red leather booth in a fabulous restaurant in Chelsea. By dessert I had charmed my way back into Melinda's good books, and had an erection like a lead pipe. She was sticking her stocking foot in my crotch and grinding along my length, giggling filthily, eyes twinkling in candlelight. I was breathing hard, the blood pounding in my ears, the wine sloshing drunkenly through my veins. Briggs was by this point a ghost, a fading, laughable idea. I was safe. I was safe and secluded behind layers of opaque, bulletproof exclusivity, untouchable, in a whole other glossy dimension, utterly separate from his miserable, seedy, monochrome world.

Mel and I giggled at each other and poked fun, we drank and we flirted, we exchanged strokes and pinches beneath the table, we made obscene oral gestures with our food. We would have romped like chimpanzees on ecstasy, had we had the place to ourselves. She said she had to visit the lady's bathroom, squeezing my crotch as she left.

I sat back and sipped the wine, closing my eyes and breathing it in, letting its delicate flavours play their music. After a minute I revived, let my gaze leave the booth and wander across to the other diners. It came to rest on a gorgeous young thing who was evidently with her mother. Blonde curls fell down her dark purple dress to her laudably plunging neckline. I could touch her generous breasts with my eyes, I knew precisely the feel and heft of them. Only the nipples remained aloof and mysterious. I wanted her desperately. The waitress approached, offering a fresh bottle. I agreed, just to engage her. This one dark, full-figured. I mentally clasped her hips and pulled her down onto me, pressing into her with delicacy and restraint, before ramming myself-

‘I’m back, darling!’

‘Ah! Good Lord! Indeed you are! My sweet. My one and only. My juiciest of morsels.’

‘I can’t be bothered with coffee. Let’s get back to yours. My enthusiasm was running down my leg when I went for a pee.’

‘Ah. How delightfully awful of you, sweetness. Let’s away.’

I sent Mel out to hail a cab while I paid, rather than wait the extra two minutes for one to be called. We jumped in and agitated for the driver to take the fastest route possible. As Mel bit my neck and twisted my nipple, my phone rang. I wrestled it out of my jacket to

find it was one of my main clients, a relentlessly top ten author who shall remain anonymous. Let's call him Ryan.

'Ryan! A very good evening to you! How *are* you?'

'How am *I*? I assume you are going to deny all knowledge of the jiffy bag full of *shit* I received today, that had one of *your* business cards sticking out of it?'

I went numb, the blood and wine drained from my skull. I couldn't hear anything for a few moments, then my system burned with adrenalin. 'Um, I don't ... I don't know what to *say*. Ryan, you couldn't *possibly* imagine this had anything to do with me?'

'No, rationality says you had a peripheral involvement at best, but you had better find out what is going on! *This, I don't need!*' He slammed the phone down so hard that I felt as though he'd done so on the top of my head.

'S-sorry darling, just give me a moment, would you?'

'Whass the matter?' She looked dishevelled and, to my suddenly sober eyes, rather a cheap, distasteful wreck.

'Look, I think perhaps I'd better drop you off and just- *oof!* Dear *God* in heaven!' She had immediately thumped my groin.

'You don't *drop* me off! *Pig!* We've got a *date!*'

'Ah ... you're right, of course ...'

'Yes, that's *right*,' she said soothingly, stroking my cheek with her knuckles. 'Mama's going to take *good* care of you. And you're going to take good care of mama, yes?'

'Oh, indeed ... s-sweetness.'

Back at my place, Mel made herself at home, putting on music and dancing around in her stocking feet, making drinks, eating a cheesecake from the fridge, smoking one of my cigars. I was still nursing my abused groin, head spinning from the call with Ryan, when I noticed that I had a string of missed calls, voicemails and texts from clients. I couldn't bring myself to listen. Neither to my home answering machine, which said it held 22 messages.

Briggs.

Undoubtedly. I was hunched over, biting my nails, when I felt ice pouring down my neck! The shock took my breath away, before I bounded to my feet, shaking like a madman to loose the ice cubes from my shirt. 'What the *fucking shit*?!'

'Fuck you, arsewipe!' Mel was holding a piece of paper as though it were a smoking gun. She spat on it and slammed it hard against my left cheek. It stuck for a moment, then slid off, fluttering to the parquet

floor as she took her coat and sailed out of my living room door. The front door slammed and I sagged to my knees, then tremulously picked up and read the piece of paper before me.

‘Dear Miss, you should know that while you were in the toilet, your gentleman friend was eyeing up every other woman in there, especially the brunette waitress and the young blonde lady with the older lady. He was practically dribbling. He’s no good.’

I felt sick. *Briggs*. Could he be *this* proactively demented? Surely he couldn’t imagine that this would persuade me? It couldn’t be *just* about me not taking him on. Could he be an industrial spy, sent in by one of my competitors, trying to bury me? Wait—the story said ...

After changing my shirt I went into my office and looked up the submissions database. And there he was. I’d never clocked his name until reading the *Agent* story, but he had several stories in there. I insisted that all physical submissions be scanned and added to the database, along with those sent by email. I found the previous one he’d sent, called *The Gatekeepers*. I sat in the darkened office squinting at my computer, nursed by a glass of Talisker. I read with fascination.

He’d described the frustration, the fury, the disempowerment that arose from his dealings with literary agents. Their intransigence, their refusal to deal with people, to talk to them. He created a picture of them hiding in a remote fortress, behind high, thick walls, their battlements lined with P.A.s, secretaries and other intermediaries. He drew parallels with ministers of state, with CEOs, people in the public eye who were almost entirely insulated from the public.

I had never had an opportunity to see this point of view, to experience this aching sense of despair he described. In my position there was nothing not open to me. That I could think of.

Briggs’ other stories were mostly of the outsider character, living with his nose pressed up against the glass, on the opposite side of which lay the rest of society. One mixed only with other marginalised beings, eking out an existence in the gloomy periphery. This world he showed me was so utterly alien, I could not relate to it in the slightest. I could not imagine the kind of reader who’d wish to indulge in this kind of study. There are many modern ills of which I would hope my children would know nothing, if I were ever to *have* children. But I simply had no taste for his work, and knew no one who might. Certainly not in commercially viable quantities. I could not help him,

but I did not deserve to be hounded, persecuted, attacked for this. He was turning my people against me ... perhaps hoping to see me fall far enough that I'd see the world through his eyes.

I gave up and phoned Norris to report the evening's events. He took it all down, grunting, asking the occasional question to check details. He said he was on the case, and not to worry. I then retired to bed, after locking every door and window securely. I eventually slept, but not well.

When I awoke, Briggs was my first thought. As long as I could handle the immediate situation, it would surely dissolve. Especially if Norris got to him. Buoyed by my positive thinking, I bounced out of bed and called my P.A., Nessa. I gabbled at her, told her what fire-fighting actions to take regarding Ryan in particular, and said I'd be in the office by ten. I soaped in the shower, and felt better when thinking of her making calls and checking in with clients. She was a devastating creature, picked largely for her capacity, like Mel, to subdue men. Believe me, it is vital when one deals largely with male clients, all of whom are being constantly tempted by other agents. You need every possible trick up your sleeve.

Not entirely to my surprise, there was a suspiciously squishy jiffy bag in my mailbox. I would let Norris deal with it. Outside, I approached my car, and slowed. I looked left and right, then crouched to peer underneath. I could see no obvious bomb—as if I knew what a car bomb looked like. I called a cab, and waited rather self-consciously for it to arrive. I thought of hiring another private detective, or calling the police. Just then, I got a call from a number I did not recognise.

‘Mr Lewis?’

‘Speaking.’

‘My name is Christopher Perkins, I’m Mr Norris’s solicitor.’

‘Oh yes? Is there something I ought to know?’

‘Well, Mr Norris thought so. He was arrested at 5 am this morning and taken to a local police station, where he’s being held for offences relating to child pornography.’ My eyes widened, words failed me. ‘Yes, it’s a shock. However, he maintains complete innocence. He thought you ought to know the situation, as he said he thinks this may relate to the case he was working on for you.’

‘Oh my. My goodness. Yes. Jesus God. I ... I find this rather difficult to take on board.’

'I can imagine. However, we'll get to the bottom of it. It just may take a little time.'

'God. Did he say he'd found anything at all on the man Briggs?'

'Mr Norris's home is sealed off. It will of course be thoroughly searched by police.'

'Well, if he has something, maybe they'll find it.'

'We shall see. That's not something I can intervene in.'

'Right. Of course. But what should *I* do? Did he tell you much about the Briggs situation?'

'He said he didn't think you had anything to worry about.'

'Oh good.'

'Until now.'

He rang off, and I stood and stared at my shoes. I swallowed hard and looked about me, with what were by now misty eyes. I suddenly heard the music from Cape Fear in my head and thought of the name Max Cady. I shivered.

The cab dropped me near my office in Pall Mall, and as I walked past a phone box it began ringing. I knew it was Briggs. It was classic. I stopped and stared, and the ringing only got louder. My eyes burned into the receiver, daring it to continue. Finally it stopped, and I realised I'd been holding my breath. I exhaled and then jumped as the phone rang again. I reached and grabbed the receiver. 'Yes?'

'Mr Lewis. At last we meet. You know who I am?'

'I know.'

'I think not. However, the main thing is, I have your attention. Or at least, I hope I do. Would *you* say that I have your attention?'

'You do indeed, Briggs. But *why*? Why all *this*? This harassment? This *madness*! You need to understand something. You have to deal with people honestly and fairly and lawfully, not try to bully them into getting what you want.'

'The irony. Oh, *mister* Lewis. Do you have any idea what Confucius, Eva Perón and Da Vinci have in common?'

'*What?*'

'I thought so.'

'Pleeease get to the point! You are going to be in a *great* deal of trouble with the police, and for what? Have you just flipped? Are you *mad*?'

'Well, by the standards of *this* society, I hardly think so. My mental state is absolutely consistent with a man of conscience trying to live in a world in which we all tacitly accept brutality, inequality and immoral

behaviour, as simply an everyday fact and facet of our socio-cultural fabric.'

'Oh God in heaven. *Really*, Briggs? What *is* this about?'

'Didn't you just hear me?'

'I heard what you said, but what do you want from *me*?'

'I wanted you to *listen*, Mr Lewis. It seems you are incapable of even that. Well, perhaps that is why you are the man you are.'

'Look. I've had *enough* of this. I will *not* be toyed with! I shall go to the police and they will see to you. I am fairly sure you have committed a number of serious crimes already, and—'

Clunk. He hung up. I stood transfixed for I don't know how long, before slamming down the receiver myself.

In the three weeks between receiving that call and finding myself sitting here on this rock, I've been nearly run over twice, had a formerly amenable prostitute tie me to my own bed and leave me until the maid arrived the next morning, come home to find my walls spray painted with men copulating—for some reason—and, let's see ... had my bank account defrauded, my office raided by the vice squad, I have made some extremely ugly headlines, and been dropped by all but two of my clients, both of whom are, I believe, senile.

I finally got a note telling me that it would all end, if I came here, to this place on this island, on this day, alone. And so here I sit, upon a brass map of the area, set into a flat rock, and I meditate on dread, feeling half crazed. And I dread what comes next.

And surely, we will soon know. A car approaches, curving around the thin roads, dust thrown up and immediately whipped sideways by the breeze. It feels cartoonish, like he won't *really* get out of the car. It draws near, pulls up a dozen yards away. I can see someone in the driver's seat. Out he comes. Medium height, jeans and t-shirt, sunglasses. He's in his late twenties perhaps, dark, unshaven, walks with a kind of animal pride.

'Hello, Mr Lewis.'

'Briggs. You're much younger than I expected.'

'You look a state.'

'Mm.'

'So, go ahead.' He looks cheerful, self-satisfied.

'What?'

'Ask me.'

'No.'

'What?'

‘No, I’m not going to indulge in any more of your bullshit. Whatever you have to say, whatever speech you want to give, just get on with it. This is obviously personal, you’re obviously a *monstrous* fuck-up. So get the hell on with it, then *fuck off*.’

‘Are you trying to upset me?’ he asks. I just look at him levelly. He’ll not draw me in. ‘Still the man behind the fortress wall.’ He snorts, then purses his lips in thought. I relax, feeling that whatever is coming has already lost its power. What more can he possibly do to me? ‘Mr Lewis, there is a *reason* I wanted to meet you *here*. Can you think what that might be?’

‘No, of course I fucking can’t, you madman.’

‘Then I’ll tell you. I was conceived, just over the water there, in Venice.’ He stares at me from behind those dark glasses, casually pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. He comes closer and sits before me, cross-legged on the gravel. He waits for the moment when I should say something, then cocks his head to one side and raises his eyebrows. I wait, and he waits, then raises his eyebrows again, and now I feel it. Ice water, trickling down my spine. Cramp in my bowels. He sees it. ‘Yes,’ he says gravely. I feel nauseous. I know what’s coming. I wave a hand at him, trying to swat it away; I feel the weeks of torment catching up, a dam breaking, my mouth fills with saliva. I get to my feet, legs weak, and stagger over to the lone pine that stands with us. I take a deep breath and vomit noisily at its base. The words are tumbling in my head, tumbling in my stomach, the images rise up and I vomit again, as if to purge them. ‘I see it’s all coming back to you.’ He takes his time, a note of satisfaction in his voice. ‘What was it you said? We must deal with people *honestly … fairly and lawfully*? Not bully them into getting what we want?’

‘Jesus …’ It’s all I can say. A flashback of me singing in the school choir … then of raven hair spread out on the bed, full lips, my arms, muscular in my youth, my laughter, her head shaking, her voice saying No, over and over again. I try to make that voice say it playfully, I scream it in my mind, I *need* her to want me. And I want to find some moral high ground to clamber upon … I cast around, my gut aching. I fall to my knees. Everything is pain.

‘Maria Fanucci.’ The words twist inside me, I can’t believe my ears. Surely the past is the fucking past. It should stay there. He reads my mind. ‘That’s the thing, Mr Lewis. The things you *do … stay done*. I was swimming around in those nuts of yours a quarter of a

century ago. And there I should have stayed. But you clapped your eyes on Maria Fanucci, and ... well. The rest is history.'

I look back and he's still sat there, half smiling at me from behind those sunglasses. I get the mad thought that I've imagined the whole thing. That of *course* this is not true. I would never do such a thing. I *could* never do such a thing. But there are no words for this moment, if it be true. I think to speak of regret, of apology, but this is not what he wants or needs. He has the self-possession of an African dictator, the calm of a Zen Buddhist. He has closed some loop, and seems to need nothing more.

I feel broken.

A minute passes, and the sound of the insects comes to me, the breeze, whipping sandy grit across the tiny plateau. Out over the Adriatic the sun shimmers atop that sapphire blue expanse. Even in this, the most deeply anguished moment of my life, there is something perfect. The stillness takes me. I spit, it sails off down the hillside. I move, the million complaints of my body go with me, back to the rock, where I slump down again, facing him. He takes his glasses off and our eyes meet. He is my son. But in this moment he feels more like my father. Part of me is weeping. Part of me is dying. The moment hangs in the air, longer and longer.

I see us as two skeletons, facing each other. Two bags of bones. With organs, and the many systems, circulatory, respiratory, limbic, nervous. And the capacity to stop our own bleeding, to heal cuts, to flush toxins. My mind looks out from this biological miracle, at this glorious natural wonder. My soul experiences the world and feels love for it. My heart is joyful, and breaking at the same time.

He stands, looks around us. He looks back at me with an expression I cannot adequately describe. Perhaps redolent of a priest.

'I'm Carlo,' he says, extending his hand. Without thinking I wipe my hand on my trousers and I lean forward to shake his hand. My jaw opens and closes but my tongue does nothing. I want to ask who Briggs really was. I want to tell him why I keep my distance from the public, to show him the scars.

My son puts his shades back on and turns to leave. He pauses, for just a moment, then continues.

I want to call out, to tell him I will see to it that he is published, that his stories will be told. But as he gets in his car, starts the engine and leaves, drifting quietly back down the hill and out of sight, I feel that he has done so. He has told the most important story of his life, to me.

The shock of it all is extraordinary.

After some time: Now what? The question asks itself, over and over again, but my mind is blank. I try to think of what is most important, what single thing I should take from this, but somehow it all looks the same. It is as though a reset has occurred, and now I must make my way back to the world and take all at face value, one thing at a time.

Perhaps I will feel compelled to confess, or perhaps I will choose to live with my deeds silent, my revelations secret. I think about this and feel no particular attraction to either option. I am certain only that I desire a little water, to swill my mouth out, and more to drink, and yet more to bathe. And then a meal, then sleep. I am stripped bare, hollowed out by truth. What will reassert itself in the morning, of the self I was before, I have yet to discover.

It's About Time

What do you believe? In your heart of hearts, what, in your life, do you believe one hundred percent? For example, do you believe that you will grow old? That there is a you out there, some way down the road in time, waiting for you to make good choices, because their life depends on it? Or do you believe instead that there is only now? Only *right now*—the only moment you are alive, or ever will be? Can I be honest with you? I don't think I'd ever thought about it. Not until a month ago. And now? I think about it round the clock. When you hear what I have to tell you, you'll understand why.

I was in a bar, I think I'd been there before, but I'd just hit whatever bar looked dark and quiet and anonymous enough, you know what I mean? Maybe you know. I was a drinker. I drank. Every day. I'd just slip in, order, and get into it. Maybe I'd remember leaving, maybe not. And sometimes you get someone join you. Could be a hustler, a hooker, could just be someone who needs to talk at someone. And oftentimes, that's all it is. But, once in a while, it's someone who actually needs to be *heard*. And that's different.

So, on that particular day, that particular bar, I guess I slid in there some time after noon. The heat that pounds the streets of L.A. in August has weight to it. You get into a bar with the AC on and the lights off, you spring up about two inches. Once you're in, your face gets lit up like some carnival freak by the neon. The barflies too, sitting at the bar in their jackets, mostly silent, intent, kinda like monks. You feel respectful around them, leave 'em to it. I guess I got a different vibe, but folks'll come right up to me and start in, no problem.

Sure enough, there I was, minding my own business, when I feel the weight of someone behind me. I'm at a table near the back, as far

from the door as I can manage, facing away so I don't have to squint when the door cracks open and the place is blasted with that light from outside, like an angel just walked in. Anyway, I'm a couple of beers deep, just getting started, when he says, 'Mind if I join you?'

I turn slightly, see if he's got a blade, but he's just some old white guy, fidgeting his way into a chair next to me. I give him a once-over and shrug. Grey hair and beard, but not shabby-looking. Dressed okay, an unfussy coat, a shirt with a collar that looks freshly pressed. And he's no lush. Eyes are too bright, movements too sharp. But he's got this nerviness, he won't look right at me, starts playing with his beer bottle, turning it round and round on its base, looking kinda jumpy. I take another slug and mumble, noncommittal. He looks over his shoulder, then moves around to sit in front of me. He kind of hunkers down in his chair, like he's trying to hide behind me. I get that sober feeling. The guy's trouble after all. I look up at him briefly, and he catches me full in the face with a smile. There's something in there, and I'm not quite sure what it is. I get some strange feeling from when I was a kid, like when someone'd say, usually with a little music in their voice, 'I know something *you* don't know!' This guy has something to say. I figure I can always leave if it gets ugly.

A few more moments, I just stare at the table in front of me, a hand around my beer, static. Only someone who drinks or gets high a lot can be a statue like that. Or someone who has religion. I guess those meditating monks could hold their own in a sitting contest with me.

Finally he says, 'Friend, can I tell you something?'

I've heard this line *many* times before. Talking of religion, people will come up to you in bars and confess all kinds of things. They have some crud to wipe off their slate, and once it goes through the ears of a drunk it comes out purified, like spring water. And it's so little effort to oblige them, you just sit there. So, I say the only thing I *can* say.

'Sure.'

He breathes your genuine sigh of relief. And another. He looks like he might cry, puts a hand to his eyes, but he goes another way.

'Okay, what I'm going to tell you ... well, you may never be the same again. Are you ready for that?'

I look up, I run the God detector over him again. Looks clean. He's twitchy, but sincere. This is something else.

'Ready as I'll ever be.'

I play that line loose, not too sarcastic. Just enough to put a little buffer right there on the table. His eyes dart around again, he's looking

everywhere but at me. After a second he opens his mouth, but then just keeps sliding his jaw side to side, weighing it up. He raises an index finger, wags it. Finally he speaks.

'I guess I'm gonna give you a piece of advice.' Right before I can speak he carries on. 'It's about *time*, okay?' He laughs suddenly, kinda rolls his eyes, like he just got the joke. 'Yeah. Ha! My friend, it's about *time*, I told someone about *time*.' He cracks up again, this wheezing laugh, his shoulders bouncing up and down. He slaps the table with his palm. 'God *damn!* God damn ...' he trails off, shaking his head. I want to know what the fuck, but don't want to encourage him, you know what I mean? 'Okay,' he says, 'listen up.' He clears his throat, shrugs, puts his fingertips together on the table and leans in a little. He fixes me with this look. 'I am in a *unique* position, to tell *you* ... about *time*.' He points at me and lifts his eyebrows. 'Mm?' Cocks his head to one side. I get the feeling he's waiting for me to catch on.

'So, go right head, friend.' I play that one pretty straight. He takes a breath, looks away for a second, then back at me.

'Alright then. You watch movies and stuff about time travel? I mean, you've seen a few. Am I right?' I nod. 'Good. Then you know how it goes. Wish fulfilment, all that kinda stuff?' I nod again, taking another slug. 'Well. I'm here to tell you ... it's *very* different.' He sits back, looks me up and down. He's giving this the big production. I figure, why *not* indulge him? Could be quite a show. I nod again.

'How so?' I turn to catch the bar guy's eye, wave my beer bottle. I turn to my man. 'Another?' He shakes his head, but I hold up two fingers anyway, and wait for the guy to bring them over. 'Okay, we're set. Shoot.'

'Okay.' He leans in again, gives me these tiny little expressions that say, okay, I'm trusting you to take this on board, and hoping you can keep up. Then he says, 'As far as I know for *sure*, I am the one and *only* human being ... that has *ever*, successfully travelled back *and* forwards in time. Mm? Huh?' He tips his beer towards me and nods, then winks and takes a mouthful.

'Okay.' I give a little shrug, like, yeah, *and*?

'Yeah. You know how *long* it's been around?' He smacks his lips, waiting for me to shake my head. 'Since the mid 1960s. Before you were born, I'm guessing.' He tilts his beer at me again and laughs, friendly, then leans in. 'The *military*,' he says, glaring. '*Obviously*. NASA guys too, picking up on work done in Germany and Austria during the second World War. Yeah.' His eyes kind of *flare* as he says

that. ‘I was picked,’ he says proudly, tapping his chest. ‘Well, me and a bunch of other kids,’ he says more modestly. ‘We were meant to be heading for ’Nam, but they sent us to ... *another place*.’ His eyes go kinda nervy again at this, some fear there. He looks up, around, towards the door again. ‘Anyway. They split us up ... one by one we get carted off ... there were rumours ... *crazy* ... you’d have to be *nuts* to believe them ... but they were *true*. Holy God in heaven, they were *true*.’ His eyes glaze up, he’s staring way back.

I figure I might have lost him altogether after maybe ten seconds of nothing. Then he comes back.

‘So, yeah ... anyway ... *my turn* comes, after maybe three weeks, dying of boredom, under ground. I get briefed by a couple of guys in suits, a couple in uniform. They tell me I’m gonna serve my country, that I’m gonna make the world safe from the *scourge* of Communism. I’m just sat there nodding, trying to figure out what I’m meant to say or do ... finally they open a brown folder stamped top secret. The files inside are all stamped top secret. Part of me’s excited, you understand?’ I nod, slightly dazed. ‘So I’m gonna just ... *go along* with whatever, right? Serve my country? You’re *damn* right I’m gonna!’ He goes to slap the table again but pulls up, and pats it instead. ‘There’s such a thing as doing *right*, isn’t there?’

He takes a moment, but it’s apparently rhetorical.

‘So, I keep nodding like a frickin’ ... *somethin’*, while they tell me about the program I’m involved in. It’s scientific stuff, physics and energy and particles and Christ knows what ... I can’t take it in, can’t stop my brain trying to skip ahead, figure out the punch line. And then they get to it. Me and the guys are testing a new technology that will not only help us win the war in Vietnam, but win every other war, and create permanent ... *American* ... *hegemony*.’

He flashes that smile at me again. This one’s kinda cheeky.

‘You *believe* that? That’s *just* what they said to me. Like *that*. They figured they’d come up with a fool proof plan to rule the world, *forever*. Even to me—a rubber-faced recruit, destined to be cannon fodder, take my last breath in some steaming hundred-degree jungle, *for my country*—that sounded fuckin’ *crazy*. But, sure enough, they take me along what felt like a mile of corridors and tunnels, and finally to this huge room. Holy *shit* it was big! It was a dome, maybe two hundred feet tall at the centre. There’s cables and pipes, and walls of lights and switches, and generators and control rooms, and everywhere, there’s guys in every kind of uniform and suit you can

imagine. There are big screens around something in the centre, and around it, only the guys in the big white suits with these *huge* helmets. The MPs take me to a long cabin off to one side, where they strip me down, stick me in a weird shower kinda thing where they wash me and zap me with some light gun, then I have to dress alone, put on this sealed white suit and helmet, in an air-tight room, while some guy the other side of a window is giving me instructions. Finally, he comes in and checks my gear. I'm good to go. No one looks me in the eye. Part of me ... well, I just want to say no thank you and just *walk* ... and keep *on* walking. But I have to let that go, you know?' He pauses, to look for some understanding. I pull a face like I understand.

'Sure,' I say. He nods, a brave little smile. He's grateful.

'So, *then* they take me to the centre of the big room, where all the pipes and everything else lead to, where *everyone*'s now looking. Behind the screens ... it's a kind of metallic sphere, about the size of a VW bus, in a kind of harness ... with these big red digital clocks next to it, one set at 60 seconds, and another with the time, hours, minutes and seconds, ticking away. It was just before 10.00 hours. It's open, and there's room for one in there, plus luggage. You have to walk up a step to get into it, and that step was the biggest I ever took. Felt like I weighed a freakin' *tonne*.' He pauses again, giving me a look. 'Biggest step I ever took.'

The air kinda goes out of him, he shrinks, right there in his chair. I want to say something like, look buddy, you don't want to talk about it no more: don't. It's cool. And right *then*, I realise I'm actually *buying* it. I sit back too. I think, *damn*, this guy's really something. I don't know what *kind* of something, *but*. I don't know what to say, so I just gave a little 'Mm.' He kinda picks up then.

'Er, where was I? Right, the *step*. So anyway, I get in there, and this guy in one of the big white suits tells me that they'll open the door after a few seconds, and my work will be done for the day. I say okay, and in I go. It's totally black in there when the door closes. I didn't even look up as they were closing it, I was shiftin' about, trying to get comfortable. A few seconds go past, it's dead silent. I just feel the sweat beading down my forehead, I want to wipe it, but I can't, 'cos of the helmet. I start to get a little freaked. It's so damn hot in the suit. I can't hear anything. Then there's this vibration, it just keeps building up. It starts to get kinda noisy in there, then *deafening*. It was hell. I don't know how long it went on, I'm just holding on to these little handles, either side of my butt, grittin' my teeth ... but then it just

stops. And sure enough, the door opens. I climb out, they're all kinda gathered there, the guys in white suits, and about fifty feet back, maybe twenty guys in all these different uniforms, a few of them looked like brass, and a guy in white asks me how I feel. I give the thumbs up, and the place goes nuts, whooping and hollering and handshakes and high-fives. Then they catch the dumb look on my face and point behind me. I turn around and all I see is the clock. 09.55. I look back, shrug, and it's like I'm Bob fuckin' Hope, they're laughing their asses off.'

'No shit.'

'No shit, I *assure* you.' He leans his head down and strokes his fingertips gently across his forehead, back and forth, face expressionless. 'No shit.'

Well, I just take another swallow, I don't know what else to do. I'm hooked.

'So anyways, there's much rejoicing ... and they want me to go again. They tell me they think they've banged the kinks out of the system, and we're really onto something now. That night, one guy lets it slip in the mess hall that eventually they'll have a way bigger capsule, half the size of the whole dome, big enough to fit a battalion or two. I figure, he's only telling me this 'cos he thinks I'm never gonna make it out of there alive.' He looks me in the eye again, spreads his hands like a magician and pulls a face. 'But here I am.'

'Some story.'

'Just gettin' started, buddy.' He smiles. I smile back. Hard not to like this guy, crazy or not. We all like a good story. 'So I make a few more small jumps. Back and forward, a few minutes each time. Then it starts to get serious. They try some other guys, but for some reason, when they send them back ... they don't come back again. They open the door and there's no fucker in there! They lose a couple of special forces guys, and everyone starts getting nervous. These guys were going to be sent on missions to win the Vietnam war.' He takes a sip of beer, then a longer pull. Then he just keeps going, finishes the bottle. He shivers then, like someone just walked over his grave. He's gone someplace else again, looks kinda shook up. I want to say something, but I got nothing. I take another drink, and I start to feel real awkward. I want to split, but no one ever spun me a story like this one, and I gotta hear the end.

'So what happened, man? You're still in one piece ain't ya? You got out of it okay?' He seems to hear me, but it's like he's having this

internal conversation, and I'm butting in. After a few he looks back at me like he's never seen me before ... then recognition.

'Oh, right. Well, ah ... *yeah*. So ... okay. Seems like I was the only one who ... well, I was like their rabbit's foot, you understand? For some reason, I kept making it. So they decided to train *my* ass. Surveillance, intelligence, assassination, infiltration, languages, all kinds of stuff, all over. They figured I could go back any time, and I'd get the job done. But then, just as I was about to go back, my first mission, it seems like the lid was blown on the program. I heard Nixon finally got wind of it, and freaked. Asked a lot of questions. Over the months I'd gotten friendly with a guard on the base, and he told me the eggheads and the brass were having to have endless sessions to try to map out the *repercussions* of the work, to prove it was actually workable. Apparently they had all these huge walls of charts and diagrams. Drove 'em cuckoo tryin' to figure it all out. The big question was, if I went back and changed the course of World War II, maybe there would never be a case where the research would have come to light, so that we continued to make the machine that went back and won the war. You follow? Or without Vietnam, the programme would never have had the go-ahead. There was this idea that however things *are* is the only way they *can* be. Any attempt to make changes will nullify the *possibility* ... of *making* the changes. Understand? Well, in the end, there's a lot of covert testing, a lot of trial and error. Some things are *worth* changing, they figured. The timeline would alter accordingly, they hoped. But, for the future, that's *different*. Less messy, in *theory*. I could go into the future and come back with intelligence, and see how America needs to change its policies around the world to stay on top. You know, shuffle its cards. Problem for the guy *doing* it is, it's hard to keep your mind in one piece once you start going back and forwards. Believe me kid, it gets so you can't get a grip on anything. And everything starts to look flimsy, kinda meaningless, like you get infinite do-overs. You fuck up, you call a Mulligan.'

'Right.' I nod slowly, taking it in. 'So ... so what happened next?'

'Oh *man*. I had years in the service ... did shit that'd make your head explode. Assassinations, up close and personal, or with the sniper rifle, or C4. Stock and currency market manipulation, coups, even some lobbying work. Amazing what changes the course of history. Made a tidy few laying bets. I mean, why not? No one lookin' over *my* shoulder! So far, so good, you might think. But now, they say, the

Chinese got themselves the tech. The only *good* thing about that? That I can *possibly* think of? Now maybe I'll have someone to talk to about this shit who'll actually *understand*.' He drinks again, stares at the door. 'Believe you me, son, there's nothing that'll make you as lonely as being one of a kind. Those queers in one horse towns up and down this great country? Even *those* guys can hop a Greyhound to some place bigger and find themselves a pole to smoke. History's littered with people who were the last to ever speak their language. No one left to talk to. All those creatures who find themselves with no one left to fuck. And me, the only person I ever met who knows what I know.'

'And what's that?'

'That humanity's got a *real* problem with time. Seems like we won't, maybe *can't* learn the lessons of the past, to plan for a *better* future. We're not *built* for it. We're real good at wasting our lives, regretting the past, worrying about the future ... or we live in the now so much we don't look up the tracks even the tiniest bit, and figure out that we better be ready. Doctors that smoke ferchrissakes ... driving without a seat belt on ... running out of cheap oil ... climate change. You'd think that enough smart people are out there trying to do something about *that* one. Well, maybe the U.S. has done squat 'cos the few who *really* pull the strings figure we can always go back and do something about it. But I *seen* what's comin' ... and in less than a century the whole world's practically unrecognisable. I shit you not.'

'That's ...'

'Yeah. Ain't it? Well, friend, I've been everywhere, every *when*, and believe you me, we fuck up so much I'm not even sure we *can* do any different. Makes you wonder about fate. God. *Something*'s gotta be pushing us *this* hard off the cliff. Can't be *just* us, can it?'

'Right ... so ... so why aren't *you* going back to help fix things?'

'Too old, they say. I'm too damn *old*.' He laughs dryly, strokes his beard. '*That's* bullshit. Well, it ain't just that, anyways. I guess they don't want guys like me around for ever ... too much baggage. Seen too much, done too much, think too much. But they got new blood, that's true enough. Had me train younger guys coming through. Hand picked out of the secret service. You think *astronauts* have the right stuff, you should see *these* guys in action. *Machines*. But take it from me, there's *nothing* behind those eyes. They're kinda creepy. Well, who knows. They may be gearing up for something big ... I mean, everyone's useful for somethin', right?'

'So why are you telling *me* all this? Aren't you worried they'll catch up to you? I mean, this is *serious* shit!' I start to feel pretty nervous right there. You can imagine.

'Ah, don't worry about that, friend. I guess if there was anything came of it, they'd go and change it, and it wouldn't have happened in the first place.'

'*Ouch.*' I rub my head.

'Yeah, it drives you nuts. Well, there's a point you go past. Like learning anything new, first the confusion, then all the work to deal with it, the ups and downs, but sooner or later, it's just how it is, your mind adjusts. Whether that's its *own* kind of madness, I don't know. I do know that even though I've lived this way a long time, and I can handle it on most levels, one of the hardest things is talking to guys like you and knowing that for the rest of your life ... you'll never *quite* believe me.' He kinda squints at me, as if trying to figure out how much I buy it. Then he winks. 'In the end, what does it matter? I tell you the truth because if there's *one* thing that *really* scrapes away at the soul? When you live like this? It's the lies. The lies you tell, the lies you get told, the truths you can't tell, the deception, omission, the bluff, the silence ... the way it cuts you off from other folks. Lies are like a nest of vipers. You understand? They obscure the truth, and you try to get to the truth, *through* those lies? You're gonna get bit. Lies ... man, you get so *sick* of them. But the truth? The truth *wants* to be told. Do you know that?

'I guess.'

'You *guess*. You *guess right*. But you want to know something that'll really freak you? Bring all this home?'

'Uh huh?' I don't really.

'You know when the second world war was won?'

'It was ... '45.'

'Until 1986, the Second World War was won in 1950. Five more years.' He sits back, shaking his head. You know how much of history changed *overnight*, 'cos of that? Everything that you *think* you know about world history since 1945 ... has only been that way for less than 30 years. What's fucked up is that I can still remember the *original* timeline. Maybe I survived all this time 'cos I have some kind of immunity to schizophrenia!'

'Oh *God*.' I got my head in my hands. I look up at him ... I guess in my eyes I'm begging him to tell me he's putting me on. He reads it, holds up his hands.

'I'm sorry, friend. I'm just sayin'.'

'*Why?*' I hiss at him. Now I'm actually getting kinda pissed. He holds up his hands again.

'Well, go ahead and think about it. It's hard at first, trying to get your head around the idea of a whole other reality, something you can't *see*. But you can *feel* it, can'tcha? That something's just not as it seems? If I got you in a room with half the eggheads I met on the base, they'd scramble your brains once and for all. All that quantum relativity and shit? The uncertainty of *everything*?'

'But ...'

I can't find the words. I take a long swallow of beer and just call over my shoulder for two more.

'Listen, you can drink like a madman all your short life, or you can open your mind, and actually live the life you got given. The you that's hanging around up the road is waiting for you to work that out. *His* life's in *your* hands.'

'But why *me*? I don't understand why *me*.'

The beers come and I just pile one straight down. My throat's got that cold burn. I can't manage the next one right away. The mist settles in, and I feel a little better, but I'm vexed as fuck.

'Think about it. Just hit the streets and think about it. Go home and think about it. And pay it forward.'

The old man stands up, raises his bottle to me and throws down the last of it. He places it down gently, then pulls out a hundred and slides it under the bottle. He takes one more long look towards the door and heads for it without another word.

I sit there, dazed, for maybe half an hour. The second beer's warm by the time I put my hand on it. I get up and just walk out.

Out on the street, I look around. It all looks, sounds, smells and feels normal. The summer sun baking the cars, people, streets, sidewalks, buildings, slowing everything down. But then it hits me: maybe until yesterday, California was wiped out by Soviet nukes, or until six months ago, Al-Qaeda wasted L.A. with a dirty bomb, or some other bunch got us with smallpox ... or God knows what else. Should I feel safer, or less so ... or just the same?

I'm sober again by this point, and tired and hungry. At least my body feels normal. I drift along the street to a Wendy's, get some cheap carbs inside me. The people all look normal, the Mexicans, other African Americans, the whites. But I don't feel normal. I'm carrying around the most mind-bending story I ever heard, and I can

hardly fit it between my ears. And yet, after an hour, it doesn't seem so crazy. I mean, look at all this. How much of our technology, architecture, civil engineering ... how much of that would look like magic to folks in the middle ages? I'm saying: why *not*? Why *can't* we travel through time? I read shit in the news about it, how some bunch of scientists over here say it's possible, another bunch over there say no way. Who knows? And, would a nation *not* try to use such technology to advance or protect their position in the world? Isn't that just how we roll? All of us?

By the time night comes around I'm just lying on my bed with the window open, listening to the rhythms of the city. There's a little breeze, mercifully, but it's still damn hot. Obviously, I can't get this guy out of my head. Well, he told me to think about it. Maybe it's just his thing. Makes himself feel better, telling drunks this story, just in case they get it into their heads to shape up. He told me to think on it, and I spend all night doing just that, wondering what might be going on out there.

It hits me that it's no more amazing than the fact that we're here at all. Even being able to lay awake all night thinking about this guy's story ... that's incredible in itself, never mind the time-warp business.

Is God or some other being or mechanism controlling things? Is that where this new toy came from, to change the past, or the future? Is it *meant* to be part of our trip? Or is the point that we should make better choices, think further down the road? I mean, How *can* you know what's right, except what seems right at the *time*? You can go round and round in circles, back into your past, off into your future, but like that guy, you'll just keep coming back to today. I guess it'd be great if you could somehow get it all to make sense, like a nice neat story that runs from beginning to end, but that ain't how life is. You go ahead and *make* your plans, if it makes you feel any better, but then stand back and see what happens.

I've been tempted to go back to that bar, see if he's in there—'cos I still got a head full of questions—but it's a month now, and I've been sober since that day. I don't want to put myself in reach of temptation, know what I mean? But I feel like he's out there, trying to adjust after all that craziness. Being out of the bottle now, I guess I relate a little. Maybe the Chinese'll grab him, and he'll sing like a bird for 'em, just for the sake of talking to people who know what he's talking about. I do it, twice a week at AA. It feels good, like we're getting the lies out of us, as much as the drink. It's like he said. Somehow the worst truth

is never quite as bad as the lies, like a nest of vipers, that cover the truth.